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# Coastal Orissa After Super Cyclone

## A New Solidarity Unites Orissa Villagers As They Struggle To Build A New Life

Bharat Dogra



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**Coastal Orissa After Super Cyclone  
A New Solidarity Unites Orrisa Villagers As  
They Struggle To Build A New Life**

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## **Coastal Orissa After Super Cyclone**

### **A New Solidarity Unites Orissa Villagers As They Struggle To Build A New Life**

**Bharat Dogra**

Nauranpur village in cyclone ravaged Jagatsinghpur district of Orissa is just beginning to emerge from the great destruction it suffered in the last week of October 1999. This village has just five pucca houses and one or two government constructions where the people could have taken shelter when unprecedented cyclonic winds and rain started lashing this hamlet on October 28, 1999. As their roof-tops were blown away by the furious winds leaving them completely exposed, most of the villagers who live in kutcha houses started running towards the few pucca buildings. No one was denied shelter. Gautum Swain, one of the few fortunate owners of pucca buildings says, "Nearly one hundred persons took shelter in my house, and they remained there for several days. All rooms were filled with people." For some days the people did not eat anything. When they could go outside, they collected coconuts. Then to their great relief, a voluntary organisation - Centre For Youth And Social Development (CYSD) appeared like God's own gift to the village and started running a community kitchen. "At that time without this help we could have died," says Dushasan Raut, a Ramakrishna Mission worker and a village leader. CYSD started many development activities but there was something more than this - a newly found internal strength of the village community - which enabled them to survive their worst crisis and start rebuilding their shattered life.

Shishir Kumar Paadi, an activist of CYSD who has been involved in the rebuilding of the village right from the

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beginning explains, "A fact which villagers do not readily admit before outsiders is that in the past there were too many disputes and even violent incidents among them. This was made worse by political factionalism - the village was divided between Janta and Congress camps. Caste based discrimination was also quite strong."

It is this factionalism, long standing feuds and caste based discrimination that the villagers have been able to overcome to a large extent in the critical weeks after the cyclone. Dushasan says, "No, now there are no factions in our villages. Some may be in Congress and some in Janata, but we are all able to work unitedly for the village." Shishir adds, "Soon after we came here, we found villagers very hungry and yet some of them were unwilling to eat with the lower castes. Earlier the women did not come forward for many activities." This situation has changed significantly.

Ashok Kumar Pradhan, field level coordinator of CYSD's work, tried to strengthen this trend of the village community towards unity by forming Village Developmental Committees (VDCs) in which all sections are represented. He says, "All work is done through VDCs. Increasingly what work is to be taken up is also decided by them. So in order to benefit from this process everyone has to participate in it and work together regardless of any personal or factional differences."

There is a strong instinctive tendency among human beings (and perhaps most forms of life) to cuddle together at the time of extreme distress, to offer and seek solace, to forget any past ill feelings and face the bigger, common tragedy unitedly. Thus incidents of extreme distress also bring with them the openings of a new hope - a hope that a brave new beginning can be made by getting rid of the factions and discriminations that reduced the development potential of the villagers of the past.

Indeed in many of the badly ravaged coastal villages of Orissa, the openings of such a hope can clearly be seen

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nearly four and a half months after the cyclone. As this writer visited several such villages in Balikuda and Erasma, blocks of Jagatsinghpur district on March 14 and 15, he heard several villagers speak of their resolve to work unitedly for a better life. Reeni Prabha of Kaliyakun village, who had a difficult escape during the cyclone, says, "We are one now. During the cyclone everyone took shelter together for several days- if there was no discrimination then, why should it exist now?"

Several perceptive observers within the voluntary sector have taken note of this trend and they are making efforts to strengthen this instinctive urge of the villagers to overcome differences and work unitedly for rebuilding their lives. John Gwynn, National Director of Oxfam (India) Trust, who spent a lot of time in cyclone-ravaged areas says, "Possibilities should be explored regarding how this feeling of unity and solidarity can be strengthened and how it can be sustained over a longer period of time." Sundar Mishra who has coordinated the disaster relief work of CYSD says, "A major concern of our work should be to try to make these gains permanent gains."

Ajit Bastia, a CYSD cyclone relief work coordinator in Balikuda block gives the example of how people of several villages came forward like never before to construct Paradhna check dam. A few days after the community kitchen had been providing food to people, he says, villagers came to him on their own to say, "How long will you continue to feed us like that? It can't go on forever. So let's do something which will enable us to take care of our own food needs."

By common consent villagers decided to take up Paradhna check dam as a priority project as this will help to keep away saline water from a lot of land and enable it to be irrigated by quality water. In addition drinking water needs of several villages badly affected by water shortage can be

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met. However, it has to be cut or dismantled in rainy season as otherwise some villages will be flooded. As Ajit says, the fact that all the villagers which will be affected in different ways could come to an understanding on this project is an indication of an increased willingness to cooperate with each other. This was certainly much in evidence during the work in this project when people from 20 villages toiled together for 7 days, generating employment of 5,600 man days.

This has enabled the cultivation of rabi paddy crop on same additional land. This then is the achievement of the people's determination - despite all the destruction caused by cyclone they are able to bring under cultivation even that land which could not be cultivated earlier due to salt water intrusion or related problems.

Elsewhere in this part of Balikuda block there is a reduction in discriminative practices. In Churtira villages, as many as 300 persons took shelter in the homes of Nabhagan Parida who has a pucca house. He says, "People not only from my village but even from nearby hamlets from other villages came to my house for shelter. I took them all in. There was such a crowd in all the rooms of the house that no one could even sit. For three days we all remained standing. I intervened to provide sitting arrangements to only one woman as she had given birth just a few hours earlier. So she sat there with her baby on her lap while all else stood. In such a situation how can there be any discrimination against anyone."

In nearby Kosida village there is a Shiva temple where generally scheduled castes did not have entry before this cyclone. After the cyclone a voluntary worker from Kerala, true to the traditions of his home-state, asked for temple entry by scheduled castes. This was accepted by the villagers and the scheduled castes also helped to repair the temple.

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The growing unity of villagers is even more clearly visible in Sumra village. Ravindra Swain, a resident of this village says, " Factionalism in our village had reached such a stage that a villager from one faction would not accept an invitation from a person of another faction even on festive occasions. But now they work so closely together that it is difficult to believe how such a big change has actually taken place in a few months."

In Mahimadevipur village of Erasma block (Jagatsighpur district) the factionalism along Congress-Janata lines had been so acute that it was difficult to take up development work. Now in the post cyclone situation villagers have sorted this out and cooperate with each other in the VDCs. In Kanagulli village where there was a big feud going back to over 10 years a similar change has take place towards mutual cooperation.

Ashok Kumar Pradhan, another coordinator of CYDS says that as we move from relief to development stage, we should try to find relevant roles for all sections of villagers to get involved, this will bring the entire village community together. Alok Mohanty in Mallipur village says, "We take care of all sections in the village development committees. In addition, mahila mandals have also been formed so that women are not excluded. In a few villages like Mallipur (Erasama Block) villagers have cultivated the same land collectively for one season and later they will distribute the produce equally.

Loknath Mohanty, who has played an important role in the CYDS work in Erasma block says that to make the gain permanent and stable we do not give anything free -whether it is seeds or some other help, the villagers return it later when they can afford to do so. This will provide the basis of a revolving fund. So even when our organisation is no longer in the village, people will have a fund to support various development works and to save them from the

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exploitation of money lenders. This will help to ensure their long-term cooperation to rebuild their village.

Another positive change seen in some villages is the way in which women's have come forward to take up new responsibilities. In an Oxfam-supported project to dig a pond in Badapali, almost 90% of the beneficiaries are women. Its implementation, distribution of cash and food is being managed by a women committee. Indumati Swain and Hema Pradhan have emerged as group leaders from this effort.

This project also involved close consultations and coordination among four villages. Another project relating to river Rushikalya implied the bringing together of two villages of Karapada and Aliahad in Ganjam. Earlier these villages had strained relationship for sometime, but the project brought them together and hopefully their long standing dispute will not surface again. People feel involved as this project is expected to protect their farmland from being eroded and lost. A similar situation was seen in another Oxfam supported project when people of Sadansa and Naragabad villages who had not been on good terms earlier got together to construct a pond.

A common feature of these various efforts is that they will help to strengthen the village community. This is of great importance as ultimately it is the community which has to accept the heavy responsibilities of rebuilding the village and giving a new life to several badly shattered families.

For example, take the particularly important task of protecting widows and orphans and giving them a secure life. Initially there were some proposals to set up orphanages and special women's homes, but this was rightly opposed in favour of a community based response. Action-Aid has come forward to take up the responsibility of community based rehabilitation of widows and orphans in cooperation with Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS). As in

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many cases their destroyed houses are yet to be rebuilt, as an interim measure most of them are housed in 36 Mamta Gruhas set up in various villages. After some time they will move to living with the wider community. In some cases widows will adopt orphans thus starting a new family, or they can set up a new family with an old couple, or a remarriage can be arranged. Orphans can be rehabilitated in extended families and in foster families. Various kinds of livelihood support is planned. The main idea is to strengthen the community itself to take care of its most needy members.

### **Mamta Gruha Inmates Support** **Community Rehabilitation**

Chatipaari village in Erasma block is one of the most devastated villages. 565 persons are reported to have died in this village with pre-cyclone population of 1365. There are a large number of widows and orphans. As an interim measure they are housed in a 'Mamta Gruha' (Home of Affection) set up in this village.

When this writer talked to some widows here, they all supported the idea of community based rehabilitation. They do not like the idea that they should be sent to women's homes or the children should be sent to orphanages in some far away place. It is important that despite the low capacity of their community to provide support to them, they still prefer to live within the community instead of going to another place.

Saudamani Mandal says, cyclone has left me all alone in this world. Now I want to look after the orphaned children. This will be my world now. Where else will I go now.

Harsh Mander, national director of Action Aid has campaigned hard for community-based rehabilitation as he feels only this can provide the badly needed emotional support. Bijoy Kumar, regional manager of Action Aid, says

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that as in most villages most community members are themselves badly affected, our effort is to strengthen them so that they can fulfil this important role. We'll stand by them as long as we're needed, he asserts. Action Aid's "Sneha Abhiyan" makes effort for community based rehabilitation. For example, single woman survivors opting for foster families can be given the care of four children and two old people on a permanent basis.

CYSD's secretary, Jagdanand says that more voluntary workers should be raised within the community to help in the rebuilding of villages. Some people may think that as most families have suffered big losses it is not possible for them to provide voluntary workers but at a recent camp organised under the National Youth Programme by the noted Gandhian activist Subha Rao, many youths came for voluntary work, he says.

Both Jagdanand and Sundar Mishra feel that the way in which many voluntary organisations and activists joined hands together to speed up the relief and development work was also a very heartening step and this spirit should be continued in future. The Orissa Disaster Mitigation Mission (ODMM) was found at short notice to facilitate this process and its work has attracted widespread attention. However some voluntary workers feel that its performance could have been improved further.

The cooperation of other parts of Orissa to help the cyclone ravaged districts also deserves mention. When the main paddy crop was completely destroyed in most coastal villages, from where could they get seeds? Some commercial interests tried to use this as an opportunity to introduce their exotic seeds. But this could have been environmentally disruptive in the long-run and a much better, safer alternative clearly was to use the indigenous seeds from other parts of Orissa, particularly Western Orissa.

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In this effort a villages based organisation of Orissa called Paschim Orissa Krishijeev Sangha (Organisation of Farmers and Agricultural workers of Western Orissa-POKS) has played a very important role. POKS has 17 seed banks and so was in a strong position to meet the seed needs of coastal farmers. First it provided vegetable seeds so that farmers specially women could immediately grow some vegetables in their kitchen gardens. This was successful and many farmers were able to get some green leafy vegetables just 3 weeks after the cyclone.

After this, a much bigger task POKS faced was to immediately provide seeds for the limited rabi crop that could be grown after the cyclone. POKS volunteers were able to collect 90000 kgs of seeds which would be sufficient to cultivate 3000 to 4000 acres of land. Now for the main Kharif paddy crop POKS is collecting 2 lakh kgs of seeds to cover nearly 6000 to 7000 acres of land.

Jagdish Pradhan, President of POKS says, "Earlier a relationship of mutual dependence had existed between Western Orissa and Coastal Orissa regarding seeds. Coastal farmers have been using the paddy seeds of Western Orissa regularly but generally the traders sold it to them. But this time in their hour of distress it was our special responsibility to collect as much seed as possible and make it available to cyclone-devastated farmers in time."

There has been some political tension between these regions of Orissa but the collection of seeds provided a good way of ordinary people of one region to express their solidarity with the distressed people of the other region. As Jagdish Pradhan says, " When some of our people visited the cyclone devastated villages they were moved beyond words. They realized some vested interests create tensions between one region and the other but poor people are one in their distress and suffering."

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At another level the relief and rebuilding work after the cyclone also revealed the spirited response from many people from many distant parts of India who came here to help in various ways. In some villages where I went I was told that under the National Youth Programme youths had come from such far away places as Sikkim. A gurudwara valiantly announced that it was prepared to feed as many as one lakh people for as long as it was necessary. Some people came at the crucial early stages to help in such difficult work as taking care of dead bodies, of human beings as well as animals. At the time when paths were still to be cleared, no facilities were available, it was not an easy task for newcomers to work in this devastated region.

Similarly the response from the international community deserves praise, the volunteers who came as well as the availability of funds through several voluntary organisations.

All this is not to say that the relief and rehabilitation work has been satisfactory. Even in a village like Chaatipari where the high mortality rate has led to the arrival of several voluntary organisations, I was sad to see people living in very bad housing conditions even four and a half months after the cyclone. Nalin Pradhan, whose family suffered heavily in the cyclone, just had low walls for his house, the roof was missing and polythene sheet he had was clearly inadequate to provide even minimum protection from rain or heat. Villagers complained of corruption (some corrupt officials of Balikuda block are already in jail, they said) as well as other examples of shameful behaviour even at the time of such a disaster by various vested interests. All this needs to be thoroughly improved.

But at the same time we should not forget the several valiant and difficult efforts that were made by a significant number of persons and organisations to provide timely help - efforts which prevented the possible spread of epidemics, efforts which possibly saved several people from starvation deaths, efforts which helped several villagers to emerge from their deep anguish and start thinking in terms of rebuilding their lives.

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## ***A dog who saved children***

Kaalia looks like any ordinary village dog, but today hundreds of people look at him with admiration, sometimes even reverence. The reason - on the fateful day of the super-cyclone he saved three small children from almost certain death in Chatipur village. The children were about to be swept away by powerful waves of surging water, but Kaalia carried them up one by one to the safety to an upper place from where the children were picked up by grateful villagers.

Above all we should not forget the courageous efforts of the villagers themselves. The remarkable resilience that has been shown by a large number of villagers, their ability to keep alive hope in the middle of despair is a story that needs to be told. The most remarkable aspect clearly is the ability to end old feuds, factions and discriminations and join hands together for the united rebuilding of villages. This needs to be built upon further to ensure that villagers remain united in entire rebuilding and rehabilitation process that will clearly take several years. It is heartening to note that some voluntary organisations are conscious of the responsibility and they are thoughtfully planning for interaction in ways that will facilitate this process. Creating certain incentives for such united action is one possibility, but creating strong emotional feelings for 'rebuilding our village' or protecting the most vulnerable groups in the village (for example orphaned children) can perhaps be even more helpful in sustaining this emerging unity.

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# Don't Forget Orissa Cyclone Victims

There is a tendency to forget the victims of a disaster once the initial days of heavy destruction are over. However, the task of rebuilding the lives of the victims is a long process, and if this effort is not sustained then even the initial relief work may be wasted. This is particularly true in the case of the Orissa cyclone and floods of late October - early November where the magnitude of the tragedy is one of the heaviest ever seen in any disaster in recent years.

To appreciate the magnitude of this disaster, the combined impact of four events should be considered. On October 18 and 19 a cyclone devastated some parts of coastal Orissa. The administration was gearing up to provide relief to these victims of the first cyclone but before this could be done came the killer 'super cyclone' of October 28-29. This cyclone saw the unprecedented advance of tidal waves of around 25 feet high upto a distance of around 10 kms. or so. Even the most elderly villagers who have spent their entire life on the seaside say that they had never seen anything like this before. Anyone who came in the murderous reach of this cyclone could easily die, and predictably most of the deaths were caused in these villages. But this killer wave was confined to a relatively small number of villages. The number of villages affected by furious cyclonic storms and rain was much higher and covered a greater part of coastal Orissa. These winds in some parts had the power to uproot giant trees; mud and thatch houses had no chance of escape. The fourth part of the tragedy came when several rivers started over-flowing and flooded several villages in the first few days of November.

As a result of the combined impact the disruption of life of people is spread to a very wide area, even though the villages where most of the loss of life has occurred are confined to a smaller area. Media attention has been concentrated mainly in areas (such as Erasma block) where a large number of people have

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been killed, and it is true that the worst damage has taken place here, but the rehabilitation work has to take place in a much wider area. According to commonly cited data (which itself may not be precise) over 12 million people in about 800 villages were affected. Nearly 14 lakhs houses were damaged. 9574 human lives were lost while the loss of livestock was in the range of 3 to 4 lakhs.

A recent (mid march) visit to several cyclone affected villages revealed a mixed picture of relief and rehabilitation work. In some places outstanding work has been done by some voluntary organisations while even in some badly affected villages people still continue to live in badly damaged houses. But what is clear beyond doubt is that some very urgent steps need to be taken up by the newly installed government of the state to avoid further accentuation of distress in these disaster-struck villages.

Firstly, food for work programme needs to be implemented on a bigger scale, with substantial contribution by the government. The contribution of some voluntary organisations should be seen not as an alternative but as an addition to large-scale food for work programme taken up by the government. The government should pay the equivalent of legal minimum wages in the form of rice and pulses to people employed in repair of houses, irrigation and other urgent work. All employment work should be closely monitored by people's own committees and complete transparency must be observed in all transactions.

The onset of summer has started and in recent years very large number of heat wave deaths were reported from coastal Orissa. This time many people do not even have the normal shelter of their homes. Shortage of drinking water continues to be a problem in several villages. Therefore urgent steps should be initiated to create summer shelters where a relatively cool resting place can be provided with plenty of clean and cool drinking water. In addition there should be an information campaign for

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protection from heat wave conditions.

After summer there will be rains and some people feel that this time there is an increased risk of damage from floods. The bunding to check the inflow of saline water has been ruptured at many places and natural protection of deltaic bunds has also been lost to some extent. The loss of tree cover is worse than before. Keeping all these factors in view the protection from floods will have to be planned from an early stage. The main Kharif crop has to play a leading role in the recovery of these villages. This crop should be protected from the possibility of floods.

It is extremely important also to make available good quality seeds, preferably of indigenous variety, for the main kharif paddy crop. Preparations for this should be completed by the end of April. Provision of adequate cattle feed is another priority in several areas.

The construction of more cyclone shelters is necessary. This can be planned as a multi-purpose two-storeyed structure incorporating the needs of school, community centre and cyclone-shelter. However, the tidal flood this time was so high that this should be kept in mind for the design of safe shelters.



### GREEN HOPE

A very well-thought idea of some voluntary organisation was to immediately provide seeds of some short-duration vegetables to several villagers for their kitchen gardens. So within a few weeks the villagers had a ready supply of nutritious vegetables. One local green leaf vegetable was ready in just two weeks. Jagdish Pradhan, a social activist says, "It was a welcome addition to the nutrition requirements of people and in addition it was psychologically satisfying to see something green after the devastation of the standing, almost ready paddy crop by the cyclone."



## **The Basic Principles of Rehabilitation**

### **● Orissa Disaster Mitigation Mission**

1. The community should be treated as the basic unit for Planning, Execution and Evaluation of Rehabilitation Programs.
2. To Adopt Sustainable Development Practices.
3. Rehabilitation policies & programs should be equitable.
4. Rehabilitation Policies should focus on people's self-reliance, human dignity, and eliminating dependency.
5. Adopt a Rights Based Approach Rather than a Benevolent Approach in Rehabilitation.
6. Accountability and Transparency at all level of operations.

## **Role of NGOs**

### **● Orissa Disaster Mitigation Mission**

The NGOs have so far been playing the following roles :

1. Providing immediate relief (food, health, sanitation)
2. Implementing Food for Work in a very creative manner.
3. Timely supply of seeds for leafy vegetables and other vegetables.
4. Influencing Policy of the government for a community based rehabilitation of children, widows and other persons at risk.
5. Implementing a number of livelihood, housing programs.
6. Engaging in organising communities and building their capacity.
7. Coordinating with other agencies including Govt. agencies.
8. Implementing Public Health programs.
9. Setting up Socio-Legal Counselling & Information centres.

The NGOs have the potential for an expanded role besides the ones mentioned above.

1. Provide Professional Support for Organising a proper Coordination Mechanism at the District level.
2. Take up Livelihood Rehabilitation of the Vulnerable Sections of the Society.
3. Take up some key programs to address structural causes of poverty.
4. Capacity building & Training of the field workers & the people.
5. Undertake Micro-Planning.
6. Undertake Community Disaster Preparedness activities.

# Key Indicators to be monitored

## ● Orissa Disaster Mitigation Mission

### I. LIVELIHOOD

1. Wages Employment : No. of Person Days Created (Farm, Non-Farm, Others)
2. Farm Employment : No. of farmers, Restoring their Agricultural Livelihood.
3. Self Employment : No. of Self Employment Units Restarted
4. Food Availability : Quantity of food available (at different levels : Household, PDS, Market levels)

### II. HEALTH

5. Safe drinking & bathing water : No. of safe Drinking Water Sources Available (giving adequate quantity of water for 100 households) - No. of ponds ready for bathing purposes.
6. Public Awareness : No. of villages covered under preventive care & hygiene promotion, No. of villages made aware of prevention against sunstroke.

### III. SOCIAL SECURITY

7. Rehabilitation of Orphans : No. of Orphans Rehabilitated.
8. Rehabilitation of Widows : No. of Widows Rehabilitated.
9. Rehabilitation of Old & Disabled & Persons at Risk : No. of Persons Rehabilitated.

### IV. HABITAT (Ecology & Housing)

10. Nurseries : No. of Seedling Raised
11. Plantation : No. of Trees Planted
12. Individual housing : No. of New houses constructed  
No. of Houses Repaired
13. Public Buildings : No. of Schools Rebuilt  
No. of Schools repaired (Primary, Secondary)  
No. of Community Centres Built ( Cyclone Shelters, others)

### V. DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

14. Preparedness of the Villagers : No. of villages covered under Community Preparedness Program.
15. Institutional Preparedness : Strengthening at GP/Block/District level, Setting up of specialized institutions at state level.
16. Disaster mitigation plan/Policy : Review of Orissa Relief Code, Review of best practices worldwide, Preparation of a Blue print for a Comprehensive Disaster Mitigation Plan.

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