

Juxtaposition of Super Cyclone - 1999

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It was raining incessantly for days together with no indication of impending "nature's fury". A few Officers and staff were already present in the Department of Food Supply and Consumer Welfare by 10.15 A.M. on 29.10.1999. I was sitting in the chamber of my boss, Sri Jogendra Patra, IAS, Secretary of the Department. Another two or three officers were also there. Sri J.K. Dev, who was the ex-Secretary of the Department entered into the room at that time.

We were alert of the imminent cyclone that would be passing through, devastating the scenario of our state. But we were experiencing cold weather. Windows were kept open. Very few employees were there in the Secretariat. People were somewhat apprehensive of the impending disaster. The meteorological prediction and frequent announcement in the TV and Radio had frightened one and all but many of us took it casually. We had come across several such announcements about natural calamities in the past, but experienced that all those ended in whimper.

I recalled such an incident that took place in 1960's when I was a school student. There was a prediction in the almanac that the whole world would be under delusion due to union of eight Grahas (Astagrahakuta). The whole creation would be destroyed. One of my fellow

villager, a devotee of Saint Abhiram sold all his landed properties before the D-day and spent all his money in *kirtan* and community feast. The D-day came and went away; there were nothing more than one or two showers of rain, but nothing unusual happened. Next day the sun rose in the east and set in the west as usual. Everything was natural except the devotee who had become a pauper. He then started earning his livelihood on daily wages.

While we were enjoying our experience, the rain was gathering momentum and the wind had started blowing with great speed. The terrible super cyclone came. The disaster struck with fury. Because of heavy rains and cyclonic wind the Secretariat corridors came under the spell of showers. It was not possible to walk down there without being drenched. Suddenly there was disruption in power supply. Big trees standing besides the building started falling down one after another like a pack of cards. I got a phone call from my residence in mobile handset that about six trees in my official quarters had already been uprooted, electric supply had been cut off and zinc sheets of the outhouse had been blown away. Suddenly, the roaring of the wind created panic within. The entire creation appeared to be hazy and under the spell of a catastrophe.

It was a terrifying sight. The piercing rain trampled with fury, winds blew madly further and just within 1 to 2 hours the lush green city of Bhubaneswar was in shambles. It appeared that city was in the middle of a war zone. Trees were uprooted, buildings damaged, lamp posts broken, houses smashed, hoardings torn off, fences broken, cars and parks destroyed and low cost houses razed to the ground. Power supply had been disrupted, telephone installations, TV and radio towers completely damaged, all the modern facilities gone and the city was in the ruins. The city looked like a post-war field. Everything was shattered, smashed and deluded. It was very shocking. It dodged our assessment, carelessness, callousness and casual approach. The catastrophe came with a thousand throng, as a hydra-headed monster that anybody could have ever visualized in dreams.

Being informed earlier our main job was to ensure dispatch of rice from FCI godown at Jagatpur in Cuttack to cyclone hit pockets. About 30 trucks were lined up. We were in touch with the godown authorities over telephone. Trucks were loaded but could not move out due to the inclement weather. Gradually with the collapse of telephone lines the linkage was broken. We, four to five officers were virtually prisoners in our office rooms inside the State secretariat. Window glasses were shattered, and rooms were flooded with water. We had to go without lunch and remained hungry up to 4 P.M. At last I asked some benevolent staff to arrange some food if possible. He collected six small *golab jamus*, which we had to share amongst ourselves.

We did not know what was happening in other Departments of the Secretariat or in the office of Chief Secretary, that was only hundred

meters away from our Department in the same floor of the building. Nature's fury did not recede, it rained heavily and the window blew strongly. The visibility had become obscured.

Time passed very fast. Dark pitch night engulfed the city. We could see our faces in some candlelight arranged by some staff. We had nothing to do, but could not venture out because of heavy rain and strong wind. Fallen trees had already obstructed the rear gate of the Secretariat and also congested the front gate. After the Secretary left office at about 7.30 P.M., I along with 5 to 6 officers and staff left the Secretariat after 8 P.M.

My homecoming was an ordeal. With much difficulty our car crossed the main gate of the Secretariat and went to the right side as the road to the left was completely blocked by fallen trees. The right side road was also littered with heaps of debris and fallen trees. Wind was hissing and blowing very fast. Zinc sheets were flying like saucers. Alli, the Driver of my official car was young and courageous. He could steer us safely with utmost caution. We learnt that many cars of senior officers had been stranded on the road during that fateful night and even some of them had to return to the secretariat to spend the night there for they lost their way to their houses.

It took us about an hour to reach Sriya Square, which we usually cover within 15 to 20 minutes. Although my residential quarters are on the roadside of the Janapath, it was completely blocked by fallen trees. As I got down from the car, Alli followed me carrying my brief case and water bottle. With much difficulty we both came near my gate after crossing some fallen trees. Lo ! One side of the Iron Gate was totally smashed by a fallen bottlebrush tree, which was standing just

beside the gate and was swinging with beautiful flowers throughout the year. All the trees including coconut plants were sleeping in my lawn like slain warriors. The electrical and telephone wires were broken. Without finding easy accessibility through the gate I went to my neighbour's quarters and tried to go to my quarters from there through a way already available. It was also a suicidal experience. It was still raining cats and dogs. Rainwater was pricking like needle due to fierce wind. Suddenly my feet got stuck in the loose soil and it went down knee deep. There was no chance of crossing the fence due to loose soil. After my vain attempt for about half an hour, I felt numb and lifeless. It appeared as if the death was coming slowly unto me. My whole body was freezing. Somehow I managed to come out of that compound and dared to crawl through the fallen trees from the side of my gate without bothering about fallen wires. Alli also helped me. At last I reached the front door of my house. Thank God I survived the ordeal.

I knocked at the door. My wife opened it. She was stunned to see me trembling with cold. She took me inside, helped me in changing my dress and gave me warm clothes and hot milk. After sometime I felt better. There was complete darkness all around. The flickering Lantern light provided the only ray of hope in that eventful night. We did not know what was happening outside. Ignorance was perhaps the bliss. We took our dinner and tried to sleep with fear and exhaustion. The cyclone was lashing with full fury.

Next morning by 5.30 A.M., the sky was clear and wind had stopped blowing. When we opened the front door we were terrified to find the magnitude of devastation all around. All the trees standing around the beautiful lawn

on the front side had been uprooted and blocked the way. Soft light of the morning sun opened up nature's plight in the hands of nature's fury. I and my two sons without waiting for the Mali (gardener), started cutting the branches to clear our way to the main road through the front gate. It took us more than two hours to do the job. At last we reached near the main gate, but could not clear the big trunk, which was lying near the gate. We had to crawl under it to go outside.

A tea stall and a vegetable vendor near Sriya Talkies opened their stalls without knowing the damages caused by cyclone. They thought it was an ordinary cyclone. They started selling tea, bread and vegetables. There was long queue. Lo ! Every thing was sold in half an hour. People started quarreling among themselves to buy provisions and shopkeepers understood their mistakes. They simply vanished after sometimes.

Both print and electronic media were asleep, perhaps in deep slumber. Might be the super cyclone did it to camouflage its trial of massive destruction. I got ready by 9.30 A.M. After my breakfast, I walked to the Secretariat, which is more than two kilometers away from my house. My inquisitive mind prompted me to go to the working field and to know what had happened. It appeared life had started showing its reappearance in the midst of massive destruction. Fallen trees, uprooted electrical and telephone poles, collapsed boundary walls and heaps of debris of thatched houses of the slums blocked the roads. One had to be cautious on his way.

Both Secretariat and Indira Park located face to face were wearing a desolate look. Few people were seen in the Secretariat. I went to my Department found one/two sweepers cleaning the rooms. All our rooms were

flooded with water and filled with broken windowpanes. I asked them to clean all the debris and then went to the Chief Secretary's chamber. Sri S.B. Mishra, IAS, Chief Secretary was in his chair and a handful of Secretaries were there. As I reached there he saw me and asked me to arrange two hundred liters of diesel for GM, Telephone. He advised me to go to Telephone Bhawan, take their officer and container to collect diesel for them. I could not tell 'no' although I was ignorant of the procedure as I was just two to three months old in the Department and I was also not handling these affairs. Sri J.K. Mahapatra, Revenue Secretary enquired if I had my vehicle with me. I told him, 'No, Sir ! I came by walking'.

He said, 'Take my vehicle. Arrange diesel because we need to establish telephone contact with New Delhi and outside world first'. While I was coming from G.A. Department to go to Telephone Bhawan I found Sri Giridhar Gamango, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Orissa and few others were cautiously walking on the verandah, which was flooded with water. They were crestfallen and walking silently.

When I reached the Telephone Bhawan I found Mr. Sharma, DET with whom I had previous acquaintance. I conveyed him the message. He was happy and got ready with money and container. I was visibly upset, as I know the kind of people the petrol pump owners are. To my good luck I met Mr. Jayant Dev who went there to lodge complaint for repairing his house telephone. When I sought his help to go to a petrol pump and arrange the supply of 200 liters of diesel, he immediately agreed. He is a jolly go type. I got emboldened. We went together to the Rajdhani Petrol Pump

(Bharat Petroleum) located in front of the Unit-I market and the Capital Police Station. The petrol pump was closed but one salesman was there outside the pump house. He could recognize Sri Dev who inaugurated an extension counter about six months back there. He promised to help us. Sri Dev asked him to call his proprietor and supply us diesel. Mr. Dev also threatened him about dire consequences, but the man retorted. When we called the Police through our driver, he went away and we were standing helplessly alone in front of the petrol pump.

Then we came to the Indian Oil Petrol Pump owned by Kalinga Automobiles located by the side of the Unit-1 market. There was a long queue of two wheeler riders for petrol. Each one was given three liters. Our request was entertained and Telephone Department could get the required quantity of diesel to run their generators and maintain links with New Delhi. This was perhaps the first attempt in the process of restoration.

I came back to the Secretariat and informed this to both Revenue Secretary and Chief Secretary. Then I came to my Department. Secretary and few officers were there. Our first work was to mobilize chuda and dry foods for the affected pockets, but alas ! the city was completely cut off from the outside world. Then we tried to despatch rice. Another senior IAS officer Sri Parag Gupta, also joined us to meet the challenge.

Perhaps in that afternoon a rescue team from Hyderabad came, and they started cutting and clearing the uprooted trees both inside and outside the Secretariat. In the home front we led a very wretched life without electricity and enough water. Vegetables were not available. Only papaya and raw plantain were available

because these soft plants easily became the victims of the cyclone. The market was flooded with these vegetables.

Electricity people started repairing the damaged electric installations. They started charging sub-stations unit-wise and we were supplied with electricity after five days. To restore communication with the outside world the Government of Andhra Pradesh sent six hamradios. First telephone connection to New Delhi could be established via Mumbai towards the evening of the 1st day of November.

My Department, i.e. the Department of Food Supply and Consumer Welfare was making sincere efforts for procurement of *chuda* and rice, and its distribution to different cyclone hit districts. Supply of kerosene, petrol and diesel was accorded the highest priority. Liaison with oil companies could be established and they also extended co-operation. Initially the supply was rationed and after 5/6 days there was free supply. But Government faced difficulty in distribution of kerosene. All the families, whether rich or poor, demanded kerosene. They stood in line before the kerosene shops. 8-10 kerosene distribution outlets for consumers were opened in petrol pumps in addition to the existing ones. Even one center was opened in the State Secretariat through class IV employees union. This had reduced panic in the minds of inhabitants. Similarly instruction was also issued to other urban areas to open more such kerosene sale centres. The activities in Cuttack were also personally supervised.

Because of Super Cyclone the supply of diesel and petrol was stalled for sometime. Its requirements increased manifold due to playing of large number of vehicles engaged in rescue, relief and rehabilitation works. We restricted

the supply initially, issued more quota in favour of industrial units on assessing their requirements. The system was found to be satisfactory.

The Government opened Main Camp for Relief distribution in Kalinga Stadium. Sri Asit Tripathy, IAS was in-charge. Hundreds of truckloads of relief materials were dispatched to different affected pockets every day. All these trucks required fuel on payment. In initial period there was funds problem. Petrol pumps usually sell on cash payment. They usually are not happy with the Government system of payment. No petrol pump owner came forward to supply POL on credit. After much persuasion a new dealer having his pump near Khandagiri on the N.H. 5 agreed to supply fuel on credit. Trucks went there, filled up their tanks and then left for destination. The teething problems could be sorted out by personal intervention.

One day the Chief Secretary rang me at about 1 p.m. and asked me to see that petrol/diesel should be stored in Kalinga Stadium so that trucks could get fuel there failing which Government would consider suspending me. He wanted a compliance report by the evening. I rushed to the spot and held discussions with Shri A.Tripathy and other officers working there. I explained them that this would be impossible till a pump is installed there. They understood it. I returned to Chief Secretary by 4.30 P.M. and explained him the difficulty. In spite of his busy schedule he heard and understood me, realized the hollowness of his instruction and at last he was pleased.

A succession of worse natural disasters had wrecked havoc in the poverty-stricken State of Orissa during that year (1999-2000). Firstly, the State experienced a severe flood in August 1999 affecting seven coastal districts.

Next came the severe cyclonic storm on 17 and 18 October, 1999 which affected the coastal districts in general and the Ganjam district in particular causing widespread and unprecedented damages to life and property. My Department also intervened in the right moment and made available all supplies in time after ascertaining the requirement from Sri Jagadananda Panda, the then R.D.C., southern division as the Collector was on leave on the day of occurrence. My Secretary, Sri Patra and I could handle the affairs of supply of *chuda*, rice, kerosene and petrol promptly. Smt. Alka Panda, IAS, Addl. Secretary of the Department was outside Bhubaneswar in New Delhi for 15.10.1999 to 07.11.1999. By the time she reached Bhubaneswar, the affaris have been brought under control.

The Super Cyclone that ravaged the state was the severest in the century. It was one of the worst natural disasters in the pages of history. The super cyclonic storm followed by torrential rains ranging from 447 mm to 955 mm from 29th October to 1st of November caused high floods in Baitarani, Budhabalanga and Salandi basins, which severely affected and marooned vast areas in the districts of Jajpur, Bhadrak, Keonjhar, Balasore and Mayurbhanj. The cyclonic wind with the velocity of 270-300 kms. per hour hit the Paradip coast on 29th October, which was followed by tidal waves of 5-7 mtrs. height that ravaged the coastal districts of Jagatsingpur, Kendrapara, Puri and Khurda. The calamity also affected Keonjhar, Dhenkanal and Nayagarh districts. The State Capital, Bhubaneswar and the Commercial hub of the State-Cuttack City, were completely devastated. All surface communication systems, telecommunication, power supply and water supply were totally disrupted for more than 48 hours in the State Capitals.

In Ganjam, the cyclone and the rain affected millions of people in 18 blocks and damaged 1500 villages. The loss caused by the Super Cyclone was enormous - over 15 million people affected, 9885 human lives and about 15 lakhs poultry birds, cows bullocks, sheeps, goats perished, 18 lakhs of houses damaged and infrastructures ravaged, environment denuded, livelihoods impaired, economy shattered and property worth thousand crores destroyed. Saline inundation polluted most of the drinking water sources for days. Standing paddy crops in 18.43 lakh hectares were damaged. Vast areas of green cover consisting of more than 9 million trees were gone. Almost all the mud houses were decimated; their thatches swept or blown away. Over six million people comprising small and marginal farmers, landless agricultural workers, fisher folk and artisans bereft of their home and hearth remained jobless for about six months.

The low pressure that developed in the Bay of Bengal on 25th October intensified into a very severe cyclonic storm. By 27th it became clear that the storm could hit Orissa coast with a likely speed of about 240 km per hour and a high tidal surge. The likely trajectory of the eye of the storm at that stage was to lie across the blocks of Kujang, Ersama, Tirtol, Garadpur, Nischintkoili, Derabis, Bari, Rasulpur, jajpur, Korei, Hatadihi, Kaptipada, Udala, Khunta, Samakhunta and Kuliana. Later its trajectory became more eccentric.

The dissemination of cyclone warning and timely evacuation of people in danger areas were effective, but the immediate rescue and relief operation in the first few days could have been organized in more effective manner. It appeared as if the enemy had attacked the headquarters and every thing was in disarray.

The State capital, which should have opened its control room for 24 hours, slept peacefully on that 29th and 30th eventful nights. Perhaps no contingent plan was drawn for rescue and relief operations. My Department should have placed orders to procure dry foods like *chuda* and *gur*, but we kept ourselves busy in sending rice. Might be the administrative machinery could not anticipate the massive scale of destruction. When warning came the state headquarters should have drawn up immediate contingency plans for rescue and relief operations.

We remained busy for about a fortnight to streamline our supply lines. After that I accompanied a friend to his native village Panchapalli in Ersama block, the worst hit pocket. Lo ! The dead cows were still rotting

in the fields. Earlier my wife along with groups of volunteers organized recovering the corpses and their mass cremation in Tirtol Block. We had to issue special instructions for supply of Kerosene and POL for such purposes after receiving demands from the district authorities and NGOs.

The objective of any Disaster Management Policy should be to shift, relief and rehabilitation to a development mode. A multi-sectoral approach involving the Government, NGOs, Academics, Media and the affected communities should form the core of the contingent plan. We did not incorporate all these in our plan of action and hence struggled to deal with the situation and suffered heavily. It is indeed a lesson to posterity.



Hon'ble Justice Shri Anang Kumar Pattnaik Orissa High Court is inaugurating the Kharavel Festival-2005 at Khandagiri on 15.2.2005. Hon'ble Justice Shri A.S. Naidu, Orissa High Court; Dr. Damodar Rout, Minister, Panchayati Raj & Culture, and Shri Jayasish Ray, K.N. Memorial Foundation are also present.