

# Voicing Silence

*Experience  
of women  
with  
Disasters  
in Orissa*

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**Voicing Silence:  
Experience of Women  
with Disasters in Orissa**

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A token contribution of Rs. 50/- (Rupees fifty only) for this book will be used towards awareness raising for women's empowerment.

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**NAVEEN PATNAIK**  
CHIEF MINISTER, ORISSA



### **Foreword**

Women constitute almost 50 % of the population. No society can develop unless women play their rightful role. It is another matter that the gender ratio is worsening in many parts of the country to the disadvantage of women. Orissa was the first State to introduce reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj bodies. It is in Orissa again that the self-help movement among women is making rapid progress. Documenting the experiences of women in disasters is a very significant initiative in the context of the priority that the Government is according to women's welfare and empowerment. Women are disproportionately affected by natural disasters as a result of gender differences in the society though the truth is that women also play a vital part in disaster mitigation and response efforts. More often than not it does not attract attention of the disaster managers and media. The process of women's empowerment will be carried forward if the special disabilities of women in disasters are properly appreciated and their participation in decision-making during relief and rehabilitation is fostered. I am sure Orissa will show the way in this regard. I also hope that this document being brought out by OSDMA in collaboration with some leading NGOs will be extensively read and used.

Naveen Patnaik  
Naveen Patnaik

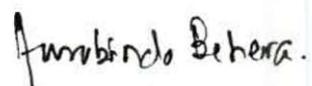
Publication of "Voicing Silence : Experience of Women with Disasters in Orissa" is an humble attempt by OSDMA to highlight women's situation in disasters and their role in prevention and mitigation. If women were enjoying equal status with men and sharing privileges and sufferings with men equally, this document would not have been necessary.

The Orissa society is a tolerant one. There are also models of women's empowerment within Orissa, which would be worth emulating anywhere in the country. In many tribal communities, women do enjoy equal status with men and play an important role in economic decision-making. Why should it be different for other communities who claim to be more 'progressive' and 'enlightened' ?

I would like to thank the organisations, which have provided resource materials for preparing this booklet e.g., OXFAM, Aaina, BGVS, Project Aparajita, Unnayan, CARE, UNDP, Indian Red Cross Society, Mahila Vikash etc.

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**Aurobindo Behera**

Managing Director  
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## **Voiceing Silence: Experience of Women with Disasters in Orissa**

### **The Vulnerability Paradigm**

Disasters can be defined as events, manmade or natural, sudden or slow, causing widespread loss of human, material and environment, which exceeds the coping ability of the affected population. Any hazard can turn into a disaster when people living in the danger zone are vulnerable and do not have the capacity to absorb the shock.

During the last few years, Orissa has been experiencing frequent disasters of varying magnitude. The destructive super cyclone of October 1999, widespread drought during the year 2000, recurrent flooding in 2001 and again drought during the current year have crippled millions, snatching away livelihoods, making many homeless, affecting all and sundry. Impacts in many cases have been irreversible. A disaster is an unexpected event may be natural or man made that causes a lot of damage.

It is now understood that people, households and settlements experience the same disaster in different ways owing to different degrees of vulnerability that they have. Some are more vulnerable than others in terms of impact of a disaster and the time taken to recover from it. Impacts on people also differ depending on the social and community roles they play, their economic conditions, geographical positioning, and access to resources for survival and restoration of normalcy.

Interplay of various physical, socio-economic and political factors determine a population's vulnerability and also their ability to respond to them.

Women are the worst sufferers during disasters. Their vulnerability arising from their already precarious social status, which limits their access to resources, to information, and what is most important- the recognition and understanding that they suffer so. Some of their vulnerabilities are listed below.



*Villages marooned in the floods 2001*

1. Poor representation in the household and community level decision making processes.
2. Poor access to information, skills, resources, and finance. Women are made to be dependent on men for the same.
3. Women suffer from discriminatory division of labour, and are often overworked. They often find themselves doing jobs that are strenuous and low paid, and are not perceived as bringing any financial gain to the household.
4. Stereotypes of roles prohibit their foray into public domains. For example, women have to continue to play their roles of cooking, care of the young and old, and household care even during disaster situations.
5. Many a time, the loss of sources of income such as livestock, kitchen gardens usually controlled by women, further erodes their economic status.
6. The collapse of physical space (shelters) and subsequent social dislocation further increases women's vulnerability for sexual exploitation.

Factors such as poor political participation of women, gender insensitivity, discriminatory governance systems, skewed economic entitlements of women result in women being the worst sufferers in disaster situations.



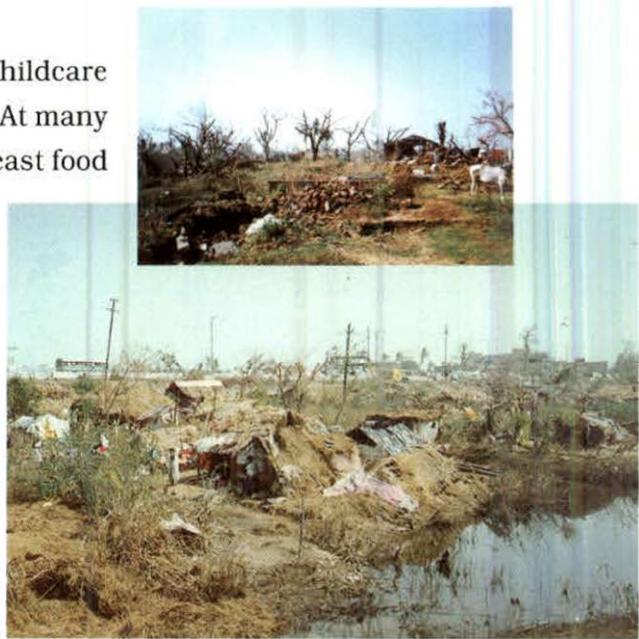
*The lone survivor - floods 2001*

## I. WOMEN DURING DISASTERS

The way disasters affect people and especially women have been documented by the Government and NGOs and Newspapers. It is being increasingly realized that disasters affect different groups in society differently. For instance, the number of sick and injured women during the cyclones of 1999 far outnumbered the others.

The following gives a picture of how women are affected during disasters.

1. The 'chaos' that characterizes many of the villages and households once it is known that a disaster is in the offing affects women significantly. The responsibility of moving household articles and valuables to safe places, watching over children (who are all the more curious and anxious to move out of the house and thereby increasing risk substantially), accumulating essential materials together such as dry food, clothing, infant needs etc. are some of the jobs that the women are engaged in.
2. Many of the above operations put women at grave risk, such as not being able to move out in time and getting surrounded by water/ house collapse due to cyclone etc.
3. Traditional clothing such as saree is not the best garb to be in when a person is trying to move faster and get saved, and yet this is what most of the women in the state wear.
4. Once in safe houses, women face the problem of acute congestion, especially women who are pregnant are put to grave risks due to these.
5. The roles such as feeding and childcare continue to be those of women. At many instances, women receive the least food materials that come the way of the sheltering population.
6. Prolonged confinement creates added problems in terms of non-availability of private space to be able to meet bodily needs. Women who are menstruating find the situation particularly difficult.

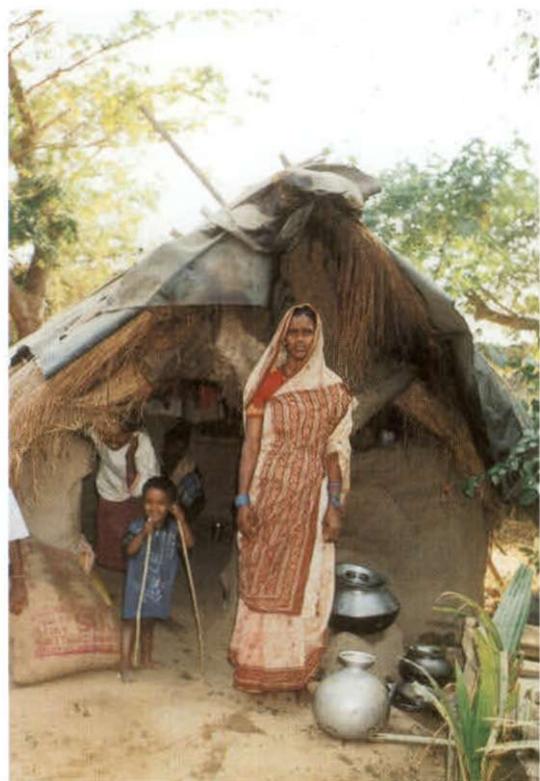


*Property damaged during the Super Cyclone 1999*

7. Women also face many health problems due to poor sanitation condition. Skin infections, infection of reproductive tract, other common ailments etc. are seen in many cases.

As critical and yet normally unrecognized is the plight of women in regions faced with droughts. The damages and impacts are not so dramatic. Several issues can be identified in such instances.

1. In many households, the kitchen gardens and minor livestock (goat, chicken) are resources that the women have most easy access to and control over. During droughts, these are usually the first casualties. These translate into economic terms and women have to give up even whatever minimum resources they had at their command.
2. Loss of livelihood for the entire family results in the women facing substantial difficulties as they have to find alternative employment (which is not easy to find) to meet household needs and at the same time they are not really relieved of the usual roles that they carry out.
3. Added time required for normal household operations takes a heavy toll on the energy of women. Women have to travel more distance to fetch water, search harder for forest resources for food, and search for green fodder for livestock.



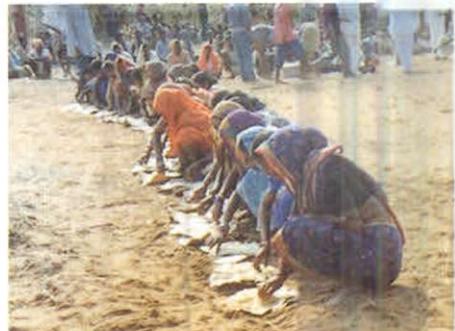
*The homeless living in temporary shelters*



*A collapsed cowshed*

4. Women have to access loans from informal sources such as money lenders and this puts them in a greater vulnerability since they have to pay back the loan at exorbitantly high rates of interest and great part of their earning goes in debt servicing.

5. Poor food availability to women and girl child in particular during a drought period has been established both through empirical research and surveys conducted by many NGOs.
6. Increased instances of domestic violence against women during periods of stress have been widely seen and reported.



*Community kitchen after the cyclone & the floods*



*Queing for food*

### **Vulnerable lives**

There is a case of extreme sex ratio among the survivors of a community in the Jhatipari village. There were only 43 survivors, 35 men and 8 women and not a single child out of a pre-cyclone population of 267. One of the survivors has brought his cousin brother's son to get the feel of a child being around. The women were in a very shocked state and felt very insecure under a polythene tent.

### **Profile in Courage: Kanaklata Palai**

A high wind blew and it rained throughout the day on 29th October 1999 in Solagan village of Soro block in Balasore district. The river Kansabansa, which flows past the village, slowly began to swell. Kananlata Palai, a college student of Saraswati Mahavidyalaya, Anantpur left for the small house on the other side of the river, where she gave lessons in tailoring to girls of nearby villages. The rain fell with greater intensity, and the water level of the river rose higher and higher, submerging roads and houses. Her tailoring training center being situated on a raised ground, many villagers came to take shelter there. Kanaklata, apprehensive that her parents, who lived in a village on the other side of the river further downstream, were in danger, borrowed a boat carved from a palm tree trunk from a boatman and set out. She went to her house and rescued her parents. She undertook two more trips in the dark and saved seven more lives, braving the gale force wind and the strong currents of the river. The rescue operation took more than six hours.

In recognition of her act of bravery and spirit of sacrifice, the Tentei Gram Panchayat felicitated her. She has received many awards from other organisations too.

May the land bear more such brave daughters.....

## II. WOMEN DURING THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF DISASTERS

Once the disaster subsides (after the period of maximum intensity is over, eg. Slowing down of cyclonic winds, receding of water), people move out of the confines of shelters to what remains of the settlement- both private and community. Some of the roles that the women play during this period are as follows.

1. The responsibility of feeding the family members, especially babies, and men weighs heavy and it is the responsibility of the women to arrange for a hearth and collect food materials for the purpose. Many a time this exposes women to risks, eg. entering a semi-broken house to get the stored food, move through water to reach a low lying house and falling into unseen breaches etc.
2. The responsibility of putting together a temporary shelter and moving out whatever is left of the house to this is mainly done by women and there is significant addition of workload in performing both the 'normal' roles (cooking and feeding, child care, care of the livestock) and added roles such as cleaning articles, maintaining the temporary shelter, safe guarding assets etc. Many of these roles make women 'sedentary' and in turn affect their role at community level.
3. Clearing debris from the original house is undertaken once water recedes substantially and this is a role, played most visibly by women. Injuries due to sharp objects like wood splinters, broken glass and metal and bites from insects, and snakes are quite common and thus adding to the problem of women. Prolonged exposure to wet soggy land results in various types of skin infections and other diseases.
4. Once the relief initiatives start, either by Government or NGOs, supply of emergency food materials, temporary shelters, clothing etc are provided. Many a time, the community processes that require distribution of these and any other material leaves out women in the true sense. To start with, most of the interventions are 'gender blind' and thus do not answer the specific needs that women have, both for themselves and also to perform roles that they are required to play, eg. Baby feeding.
5. Repair of community assets like roads, embankments, plugging of leaking channels etc. are predominantly undertaken by men, mainly because the responsibility of bringing the household in order is left to the women. This results

in women missing out on the opportunity to play community roles, to influence decisions, and wherever possible, change the structures in their favour. For example, while reconstruction of road was taken up in a cyclone affected village in Jagatsinghpur district, women said they would have preferred building a new road taking a different route than the existing and which would have reduced the distance they travel to fetch water, and also would have saved the embarrassment they feel while taking the existing road (with hordes of men) to visit open areas for defecation. But since men planned and executed construction of the road, they did not think of the benefit it would have given women and reconstructed it as it was.

#### 6. Desertion of women in the event of disasters (mainly drought) is widely seen.

It is seen that men migrate during the drought periods to distant places in search of livelihood. The responsibility of maintaining and taking care of the household and remaining members of the family (aged, children) falls on the women. The efforts to keep all these going multiply and the vulnerability of women increases substantially. Apart from apparent physical hardships, they have to undergo a great deal of psychological and emotional stress. Exploitation of households headed by women especially during this period, is high. (eg. local moneylenders, petty traders offering to provide assistance either through sale or mortgaging of household assets and livestock). Sexual exploitation of single women is also reported.

*Women cleaning a weed infested pond after the flood*



## *Facing an Uncertain Future*

Bidulata Palei, 32 is a resident of village Koratpanga, Kendrapada. She lost her husband during the super cyclone. Her husband had gone out on 27th October to the nearby island Musadiha to tend a herd of buffaloes. High waves and strong current in an otherwise treeless island created havoc and, the man and his buffaloes were swept into the sea. The family lost its sole earning member and its source of livelihood. Bidulata is now struggling desperately to support her four children. To add to her woes, the second daughter is physically challenged and the youngest child, a boy of 4 years is severely asthmatic, requiring constant medical attention and substantial expenses.

Bidulata received monetary help from the Government towards death compensation for her husband. She has also been allotted a house under Indira Awas Yojana, which is taking care of her shelter needs. But she does not have faith in herself, constantly worries over the future of her children and has almost withdrawn from social life.

Three years after all these happened, Bidulata is still not sure about what to do to achieve a secure livelihood. The compensation amount has been deposited in the bank and she depends on it to meet all her needs.

And when that amount runs out...she does not know what she would do or how she would live.



*Women group rebuilding a collapsed school house*



## *Test of Resilience*

Benga Bewa (39) of village Bagadia, Jagatsinghpur led a fairly comfortable life when her husband was alive. Her husband, Narahari, lived in Sandhakuda near Paradeep and made a living by rearing cattle. Life was pretty smooth for the family of four children and their parents. One day, Narahari died of jaundice.



*Making a new beginning through SHGs*

But Benga Bewa did not lose hope and took up the reins of the family. She looked after the cows and sold the milk in the nearby villages. However, she suffered a major setback during the cyclone, when her cows got washed away. The family survived by taking shelter in a college building. Benga Bewa possesses no land and her two girls have reached marriageable age. The third daughter has dropped out of school and the youngest child, a son, is studying in class 10.

Today, a bleak future awaits Benga Bewa. She wears a resigned look and, not knowing exactly what to do, she innocently enquires about compensation amount for cattle, and the cost of new cattle and so on. She gets by with the food she receives from the Government and NGOs. But where does she go from here ?

### *The untiring endeavours !!!*

A relief worker tells of a woman, who lost all her family members in the super cyclone. She could not bring herself to accept the reality of the death of her son, who was barely four years old. She was oblivious of her condition and had not taken food for more than a week. All attempts to make her eat a little proved unavailing. The volunteers now changed their mode of persuasion. They suddenly asked the bereaved mother to check if the food was suitable for the consumption of her son back at home (knowing fully well that the son had died). It worked like magic. The woman immediately ate the biscuit and drank the water.



*SHG meeting in progress*

### III. WOMEN DURING THE REHABILITATION PHASE

Women's role during the restoration and rehabilitation phase is primarily determined by the assistance that the household or the community is able to muster to get back to normalcy. More the resources, faster the pace of rehabilitation and vice versa. It is generally observed that mobilising adequate resources in a short span of time is a difficult task for most of the poor households living in disaster prone regions of the state. This translates into continuing suffering of the households in general and women in particular. For example, during the floods of 2001, it was seen in Kantapada block of Cuttack district that many families were living in temporary shelters even 3 months after the floods. Loss of sources of livelihoods such as the paddy crop, betel vines, artisanal tools etc. meant that the families had to work harder to make both ends meet by tapping income sources that are either unconventional or more difficult. For example, it was seen that many farming families took to fishing in rivers in Cuttack and Jagatsinghpur districts.

Women's added workload soon becomes part of a routine and is perceived as 'normal'. This would have been observed by anybody visiting disaster affected areas, and to see an increased number of activities being performed by women starting from household level work (repair of houses, collection of house building materials) to roles that take them out of the confines of the household. Attendance of women in earthworks in larger number in drought-affected areas is an example, which substantiate this point.

Psychological relief and rehabilitation measures for women constitute one of the most neglected areas. Relief workers observe that women and children in disaster-affected areas undergo varied psychological stress, the intensity of which ranges from visible signs of grief to mental disorder. Skills available with most of the NGOs are not adequate to address these problems.



*Kichen garden raised by women group*



### *Rebuilding life: Sushama's Story*

Sushama Mallick, aged 28, is a dalit woman of Udupur village in Balikuda block of Jagatsinghpur. She lost most of her belongings during the cyclone on 29th October 1999. As is the case, all the dalit households in the village were situated far from the other castes, with poor sanitation and drainage facility. She was an untouchable. Once the disaster struck, she was left with two options: wait for the relief from outside to come (as many in the village chose to do) or to pick up the shattered pieces of dreams and hopes and start rebuilding and reweaving them with a new pattern.

" I got a meager income from my work in the paddy fields of upper caste people but my husband regularly gambled away my earnings. Life was full of agony for me"- tears rolled down her cheeks when she remembered her bitter days. She adds that the plight of other women in the village was no different from hers.

Sushama mustered courage and started rebuilding her life. She mobilised women from her village to form a Self Help Group called Santimani. She was elected the Secretary of the group. The group received Rs. 11000/- from an NGO as a revolving fund and started a small business. Since that time, her life has changed for the better.

She goes on to explain, "I opened a small grocery shop in the village and also engaged myself in dry fish vending. The shop remained open during morning and evening hours and the rest of the day I sold fish in the local area". Life has now grown very hectic for Sushama, who has to look after her home, her business, and her children. Although she has studied only up to standard 7th, she teaches other village women in the evening. In her words, "I could achieve success in business since I knew how to read and calculate. Also, education gives me confidence".

Sushama's success has helped her overcome many barriers. She has gained acceptance among women from other 'upper caste' families. The local bank has agreed to provide loan assistance to the Savings Group. She is also giving a voice to the women in the village who are assaulted by their husbands, and encourages them to protest publicly against oppression. Sushama, who was once a shy and withdrawn woman, now speaks eloquently in public meetings.

Recalling all that she had lost during the disaster, she says, "I now know what I did wrong all these years. There is potential in all of us. With determination and intelligence, we can achieve anything".

### *The will to do*

Kalyani, a physically challenged young woman of Dhinkia village of Erasama block of Jagatsinghpur district had just got married. Cyclone struck just four months after her marriage and left her a destitute. But Kalyani regained her hope. During the post- Cyclone period she was part of the SHG for persons with disability. She expressed her desire to start a grocery shop and an organisation working in the area took the initiative to get her a loan. Now Kalyani is the happy owner of a grocery shop. She manages it as competently as any able-bodied person. She is quite confident and wishes to become self-sufficient. She has won her battle against disability.

### *Making a New Beginning*

Ninety percent of the population of village Jhatipari perished in the tidal water. The survivors were left in a state of trauma.

Savitri was one of the survivors and wished she had been swept into the sea. Till the 28th of October 1999 she was a happily married woman having two daughters, and a baby son. Her husband and father-in-law were the other members of her family. She lost her husband, father-in-law and all the children in the cyclone. She was in a state of absolute shock. She was barely able to narrate the happenings of those fateful days.

People of Jhatipari are accustomed to bad weather and cyclone as it falls in the cyclone prone zone of the Bay of Bengal. High tides and saline water inundation are frequent occurrences and people therefore traditionally construct their houses on higher land bases, such as mounds. Though they had got the prior warning signals over the radio, they did not take it seriously enough assuming it to be one of the usual over reactions of the Government as they have seen from their past experience. They did not leave their houses as urged by the radio announcements and continued to live on, unaware of the magnitude of the destructive force coming their way. By dawn, there were huge tidal waves with great force surging into their village.

*Women undertaking income generation activities*



*Fish selling*



*Paddy business*



*Shop*

Clutching her 6 month old baby, Savitri tried to make for some other piece of higher land but was caught in a whirlpool and was swept away by the tidal water. To her horror, she found that her baby had slipped from her hand. The tides pushed her on to a high ground. Once the water receded and the rain slowed down she made straight for her father's place. Her husband and father-in-law had been swept away. She was in deep shock. She lost her voice and did not cry. The future now looked like a meaningless void.

She was provided with relief materials. She did survive physically but what was important for her was the restoration of her psychological balance. It had to be achieved in a gradual manner. She had to overcome her trauma. An NGO group reaching out to the village heard her story from others and then slowly and gently cajoled her into sharing her grief with them. As they listened to her, the floodgates of emotions burst open. They helped her regain faith in herself and find new meaning in life ahead.

She agreed to be the caretaker mother for the temporary childcare home set up in their village for children who had lost all their family members during the super cyclone. She lavished her love on the orphaned children. And a new story began...

#### *An Enterprising Woman*

Pratima Mohanty is a resident of Nabanga village in Jagatsinghpur district. A slightly built woman aged 29, Pratima has two children. Srihari, her husband works in the local godown as a store assistant, helping with stacking and loading of groceries. A little money earned from the sale of vegetables from the backyard land added to the family income and enabled it to live comfortably. Both the children attended school and the elder girl often helped the mother with household chores and work in the vegetable garden.

Super cyclone came as a terrible shock for Pratima's family. Her house and belongings were lost and the local godown was closed down. Srihari lost his job.

Encouraged by the local NGO, Pratima and 14 other women in the village formed a

*Women weaving articles from palm leaves, bamboo and other grasses*



savings group. Initial deposits were difficult to come by, since most of the families were living off the savings that they had. The NGO helped with a revolving fund of Rs. 5000/- on condition that the group must immediately start a suitable income generation activity.

There were a lot of coconut groves in the area and the group decided to manufacture items made up of coir. Rope and doormats were suitable products that could be sold easily to local businessmen and the group decided to start the venture. The NGO helped by providing necessary skills training to the members in the village and in about 15 day's time, the first rolls of rope were ready for the market. Businessmen came to the village and bought the materials produced. Profit increased and with it the self esteem, community recognition and encouragement for the women.

Pratima then suggested that the group take up selling of sarees. Pratima was selected by the group to get sarees from business centers in Cuttack and sell it in the nearby villages with a small profit margin. Sales have increased and the group has more than Rs. 25000/- in its account after 2 years.

"Business is business...be it man or woman...hard work and intelligence are the most important raw materials"- she adds with visible pride.

Her story inspires many in the village...and would inspire many more in future....



*Pond desiltation*



*Embankment repair*



*Digging water channel*

#### IV. WOMEN AND FLOODS

The floods have caused serious problems of food security, water and sanitation for the local communities, and posed a grave danger to health and hygiene of the affected communities. Women in particular are badly affected. Their workload has got heavier in terms of feeding and taking care of children, cleaning and recovery of household items, and tending to sick family members. The coastal areas were already badly affected by the super cyclone in 1999 and livelihoods were in the process of being restored when the floods struck.

Incessant rains and recurrent flooding created a serious situation in the coastal districts, when the floodwaters could not be drained out because of embankments and soil siltation on riverbeds. The waterlogged situation lasted for about a month in many places, severely affecting the life and livelihood bases of communities, thereby exacerbating women's suffering. Discussions with women and other stakeholders like civil society organizations starkly bring out the gender concerns during the floods.

As the floodwater rises, in villages men generally exert themselves, managing breaches in embankments, assessing the water level, and planning for the management of floodwaters. Women, for their part, start piling up essentials in case the need arises to shift from their huts, and also put their belongings in a secure place. The mental stress of being away from home during a disaster increases manifold for having left assets behind at home and for having to live in the open or in temporary shelters. When the flood recedes the workload on the women grows heavier as they clean the house and recover whatever assets remains. With floodwater engulfing the villages, wet fuel wood and unsafe drinking water add to the women's problems. The collection of drinking water and fuel for cooking become particularly daunting tasks that impose additional burdens on women.

The devastation caused by floods is apparent in the damage they do to crops, houses or livestock, but this tends to conceal reproductive needs to which the women have to cater, and their own less visible but crucial needs, for example, the need for secluded spaces for defecation. Women face acute personal discomfort and embarrassment and in some areas they adopted their coping strategy of reducing the food they eat in order to avoid embarrassment. What is especially taxing for menstruating women is the lack of space and the unavailability of the local hygienic resources they normally use in such situations. The women also suffer from irregular

menstruation cycles and emotional traumas of depression, anxiety and irritation. Instances of pregnant women having false labour pains due to stress during floods and premature deliveries were also reported. Those needing medical attention could not be transferred to medical care units and thus most of the deliveries took place in the most unhygienic conditions, thereby risking the well being of both mother and the new born. Anxiety and frustration in families, and conflicts and discontentment were on the rise with loss of property, belongings, and food security in disaster situations. Depression and irritation were common in local communities. Domestic violence also increased as men struggled to cope with the indignity and frustration of enforced inactivity and the loss of authority and earning capacity.

As regards the process of relief distribution, it was seen that women (especially the lactating mothers or pregnant were not adequately targeted women) during the relief phase. In addition, women in the flood-affected areas were seen not to queue up at relief distribution points, unless it was a woman headed household or men were absent in the family.

#### *Gender dimensions in flood preparedness*

As has been mentioned earlier, flood is a disaster that can be both anticipated and expected. So, it is easier to take necessary preparedness measures. People's capacity to prepare for and, therefore, cope with flood situations can reduce their vulnerability to a greater extent. The adaptive abilities of community include a range of measures, which have significant gender dimensions. For instance, food procured and stored in watertight containers to be used in times of need. It is the women who are responsible for selection of edibles, processing, and storing these.

#### *'We too are able enough....'*

Indumati Sahoo, popularly known as Indu mausi, aged 64 years, of village Paikasahi in Sailo Gram Panchayat is involved in a number of developmental activities in Kujang Block. After her marriage in 1955 to a businessman at the age of 15 she could not confine herself within the four wall of her house. She had a tendency to discuss problems that arose in families in her locality and thus, she became popular day by day as a "Social Worker".

The poor economic condition of the villagers in her locality led her to feel that women too should contribute to some extent to the family income. Inspired by the example of "Ganeswarpur Mahila Samiti" at Sailo, she decided to form a Mahila

Samiti in her village. The Mahila Samiti called "Jugajyoti Swayam Sahayak Dal" was started in the year 1972 with 30 members, and each member contributed Rs.10/- towards monthly savings contribution.

At first, the members started making badi and papad, which they sold in the local market. As the quality of the product was good, the demand for the commodity increased day by day. With the money collected, they have helped victims of the 1982 and 2001 floods and the victims of the 29th October 1999 super cyclone. During floods, 2001 the members sent cooked food to people of the near by villages for around 15 days. Slowly as things returned to normal, they collected old clothes from each household and distributed these to the flood victims in the worst affected areas. During the super cyclone, drinking water was a great problem for the affected people. The members supported a team from Regional Research Laboratory, Bhubaneswar who had set up a drinking water processing plant. These members then prepared water pouches and then distributed these among the victims of Erasama block.

Since there was no proper road in the village, it was very difficult for the villagers to take patients to the nearby hospital during emergencies. Indu led an agitation to get proper road communication extended to the village. At last, the district administration agreed to construct the road.

Age and ill health have not been able to diminish Indu Mausi's determination to work for the community.

## V. WOMEN AND DROUGHT

The cause and effect of disasters in Orissa are multidimensional in nature. They range from the natural to the man made and from the coast to the arid zone of the hinterland. As far as the frequency of such disasters is concerned floods, drought, heat wave and village fire are always found to be the worst amongst all other forms of disaster that the state suffers every year. The destruction caused by these calamities have caused havoc in the state ruining the ecosystem and the economy rendering thousands of its people homeless and robbed them of their livelihood. The memory of the super cyclone is still fresh. And even as the state limps back to normalcy, the horror of more such disasters in the future looms large.

Drought is a common and regular phenomenon in western Orissa, occurring every three or four years. The districts of Kalahandi, Nuapara, Bolangir, Sonepur, Kandhamal, and parts of Bargarh, parts of Sambalpur, Deogarh, Jharsuguda, and Sundargarh are drought prone. Since the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1965-70), 39 blocks of this pocket have been brought under the Drought Prone Area Programme. Despite this special approach, these districts have become notorious for hunger, starvation deaths, distress sales of children, migration; the irony is that these very districts are rich in natural resources.

The immediate reasons for drought are mainly attributed to: insufficient rainfall (at 800-1200 mm a year, the average is good, but the pattern of rainfall is erratic); poor water harvesting strategies and the erosion of traditional water harvesting methods; the poor water retention capacity of the soil (due to the loose soil structure and undulating topography of the region) etc. Droughts result in migration of the local people, the loss of household assets that are sold or mortgaged to meet their needs, and indebtedness. Besides, droughts increase health hazards, such as anemia, dysentery, and malnutrition, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among migrant labourers. All of this leads to continuous and conspicuous poverty in the region.

While drought affects families as a whole, and puts survival strategies in general under stress, it has been noticed that women are much more vulnerable to the impact of drought. The migration of men aggravates the pressures on the women, children and the aged, who are left behind, have to fend for themselves, and tackle a variety of social tensions. Women are charged with the responsibility of managing the households with the minimum available resources - money, food grains, and saleable assets. In normal times, in many Oriya families, the women are socially

discouraged from going out to work for a daily wage. Traditional social norms limit women's roles to household functions and circumscribed community level activities (such as participating in the local market or village fair). But droughts force women into roles that take them out of the house, to take on more visible roles in community processes, and to access Government relief measures. During drought years, the workload increases drastically for both men and women, but the newness of the workload challenges the women the most. This struggle for survival compels women to seek out and perform non-traditional roles. This is especially pronounced in the absence of men. The women face many challenges. When the men migrate in search of work, the women's 'temporary single status' exposes them to both material and sexual exploitation. The men's absence from their houses and the 'sudden' visibility of women in the villages, Government offices and working sites triggers several responses from others - ridicule, pity, hostility, and sympathy. There are many role reversals during periods of drought, with women taking on a number of male responsibilities, but the opposite, that is men taking on women's roles, occurs less frequently.

It was evident from the discussions that drought has affected women in a variety of ways. At the household level, some of these impacts are (a) the time available for rest during normal days was used for collection of resources for meeting basic survival needs, which increased the stress level; (b) women's health deteriorates which affects their reproductive status; (c) the exploitation of women increased in market areas, especially in connection with the sale of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs); and (d) supplementary wage works had to be taken up by the women to meet livelihood needs. At the community level, the impacts revolve mainly around exposing women to a variety of functions that they have not been accustomed to performing and about which they lacked knowledge, thus increasing the scope for their exploitation.

#### *Drought: the hard way to empowerment*

In spite of several difficulties that could be identified, women also saw drought years as opportunities for their own development. They say: 'Droughts are strengthening us - we no more despair in their wake and rather have become used to look for coping strategies to overcome the difficulties'. Women felt 'good' about some changes that had happened during drought periods. Their access to market areas increased during drought years (for the dual purpose of selling and purchase). This helped in increasing women's know-how about the market as a structure, and developed their skills in operating in the market.

Wage work in Government initiated programmes (such as pond or water harvesting structures) gives the women an opportunity to decide where they will work (a choice of which construction in the locality), and the freedom to decide how they would spend the money (even if spending is done under compulsion for food grains). Women's information about and access to Government programmes increases during drought years. This information base helps them in subsequent years and also in normal years. Many instances were cited when the knowledge gained regarding wage receipts and procedures in Government offices helped women-headed households. Women are able to demand their rights from the Government, are able to ask for transparency in operations and seek grievance redressal against field level officials. There are many instances of women going on a signature/ thumb impression campaign to demand action. The women are visibly proud of this, which is evident from their elaborate descriptions of the campaigns, and the appreciation and recognition that the community has accorded to the women's 'success'.

During drought years women gain more power for decision-making in the absence of men (who have migrated) undertaking work related to community functions, land and asset management, government surveys, etc. This newfound independence and the ability to make decisions on their own remain even after the disaster has abated.

#### *Gender dimensions in drought preparedness*

Preparedness is a critical element in drought impact mitigation. The people's capacity to prepare for and, therefore, cope with drought situations can reduce their vulnerability. The adaptive abilities of villagers include a range of measures, which have significant gender dimensions. For instance, food like tuber crops are powdered and stored in watertight containers to be used in times of need. It is the women who are responsible for selection of edible tubers, sun drying, processing, and storage of these. Both men and women have a good understanding of the adjacent forest areas in terms of the availability of water and forest produce. These 'forest mapping' skills are used to the maximum extent to collect resources during periods of drought. But the knowledge bases of men and women are different. Men have specific knowledge about timber sites, fuel wood, and the waterholes where animals gather, whereas women know more about the availability of assorted food products (berries, roots, leaves), and sources of drinking water and water for domestic purposes. Men have more information related to the Forest Department and the restrictions on people collecting resources.

*Even the darkest hour lasts for only sixty minutes...*

Narphula Mahananda, the widow of Hetua Mahananda is one of the poorest women in 'Gandhanala' village of Tureikela block. Being landless, daily wage was the only source of income for her. But, recurring drought during the last four years made growing crops difficult and her family had to go without food for days. Even two square meals once in a couple of days became a dream for her. In the end starvation compelled her to migrate.

Narphula and her family were in Assam where they worked in tea gardens. After her husband's death, she returned to her village with her family. Narphula, her son and daughter-in-law used to work in others land on Rs. 30/- per day. But with the wages she could not support her family with a sick mother and her little grandson. In order to bridge the economic gap, she and her son migrated seasonally to Raipur & Sambalpur in search of work for the last three years. At the onset of monsoon in the month of June, when people start cultivating their land she returned in the hope of getting work for at least 2-3 months.

Last year in the month of October, Nurphula had migrated to Sambalpur and her son Kisan Mahananda had gone to Raipur. She had left behind her mother, daughter-in-law and her only grandson. Narphula was working as a maid in Sambalpur. She used to work from early morning till evening moving from house to house and washed clothes and utensils. In the night, having no dwelling place, she took shelter on the footpath. She found it very difficult to survive on only Rs. 25/- per day and decided to return to her village. When she reached her village, she saw that her mother and daughter-in-law were dying of starvation. After a week, her son Kisan also came back. He was working in a hotel as a waiter and had got his hand broken in an accident. He was getting only Rs. 500/- per month. Seeing the condition of everybody in her family Narphula decided to go to Assam with her whole family.

She said tearfully, "I do not understand why I'm living this stray dog's life. Sometimes, I feel like poisoning everyone including me, so that this misery will come to an end. This is too much. I am a woman after all. I cannot bear this any more".

*"Yes I'm laughing from the core of my heart now"*

Mithila Jhankar is one of the many deprived women of drought-ravaged Tureikela block in Bolangir district. At the age of 35, she was the sole earning member of her family of 10 members. Belonging to a landless family, her only source of income was daily wages from agricultural and other sources. She was the only support for her old parents, four children and an elder sister. Her sister and the children collect 'kendu' leaves from the forest, which fetched them very little money and for Mithila, every day is a struggle for food, for survival.

She has become a victim of circumstances. As her sister was childless, Mithila was made to marry her sister's husband as per the custom, against her wish. Her husband, who was once a big farmer squandered away all his property drinking liquor and gambling and became migrant labour. Five years ago, her husband died after a prolonged illness. After her husband's death, Mithila with her two children and her sister, returned to her village Kadobeda and since then is staying with her parents. When her elder sister grew weak, the whole responsibility of managing the family fell upon Mithila's shoulder. The only way she could make a living by becoming a labourer. Two square meals became a distant reality for her family and most of the time; they had to go without food. She got married to a fellow villager anticipating that he would share her burden but fate had other things stored for her. After two year of marriage, her second husband deserted her and went to Nagpur leaving her with two more children to look after. Since then she has neither seen him nor has she any knowledge of his whereabouts. She worked in other's fields for a paltry sum of Rs. 20/- per day, and tried to support her family with it.

Last year, drought rendered her struggle for survival bitterer. Work was nowhere to be found. Everywhere the crops failed. She had to borrow grain and money from time to time. People ranging from the small farmers to big farmers started migrating to find work elsewhere. Mithila was in no position to migrate, leaving four children, her sister and her old parents behind. Her debt had also increased to 1200/- at a 120% interest per year.

*"Yes I'm now able to laugh from the core of my heart. Farmlands are developed, emergency water supply is also being provided. Hopefully, we will see a good crop in this Kharif season and plenty of work for people like me", she says.*

### *Withered Hopes*

Gharmani Mirdha, a widow aged 42 years, lives in Komna block of Nuapara district. She has four children. She manages with a monthly assistance of Rs. 100/- from the block administration. Though legally landless, she has been tilling 3.5 acres of government land for 7 years. She is a member of the village savings group promoted by a local NGO and is one of its active members.

She manages tilling and all other agricultural operations with the help of her 4 children. However, recurrent droughts make her helpless and she never manages to save enough. In her words "3.5 acres is a good amount of land for a small family like mine, but I am unfortunate, since the rain goddess does not want to make me happy and droughts visit this area frequently". With recurrent droughts, the loan she has taken to buy agricultural inputs like seeds, fertilizers, renting bullocks etc, also gets heavier.

During the drought of 2002, she prayed deeply for a good crop. As it rained normally during the initial days of the monsoon season, her heart danced and sang with the raindrops. She hoped secretly that "I would be able to pay back my long standing loan and buy a cycle for my son and silver bangles for my daughter and myself".

The secret wish was not to be fulfilled. A long dry spell ensued and the paddy seedlings withered. And with them the plans that she had fondly cherished withered, too.

Faced with a drought situation two years back, her eldest daughter of 14 migrated with her relatives to Hyderabad in order to find employment. Gharmani says, "I gave her permission because I thought, "Let her survive and escape the hardships that I suffer here". At least she will have enough food to eat there".

This year, Gharmani plans to migrate out herself along with her other three children.

Community initiated grain banks constituted another (though now not very common) way of drought preparedness. A practice prevalent in some places is that the big and the medium farmers of the village encourage the poor for crop borrowing during normal years when the 'interest' (paid in terms of crops) is low. Landless families seek out farmers with surplus produce, and the loaned amount of the crop or the money equivalent is then collected in drought years. During normal times, too, men are on the lookout for 'fair' labour contractors as well as areas of work. Visits of labour contractors to the villages and to the households are very common. They recruit prospective migrants and 'seal' deals. These labour contractors are important guests and are provided with very good hospitality in order to secure their favor. In many cases, as reported by the local non-government organizations, women are lured into trafficking by these labour contractors.

*Vegetable cultivation by SHG in Western Orissa*



## VI. WOMEN AND INTERVENTIONS BY CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

It is widely noted that programmes of many of the NGOs are gender-blind or gender neutral during the immediate relief phase. Proponents of such an approach advocate that urgency is the most important factor and thus programmes that do not address specific needs of women could be said to be doing the right thing. Integration of gender issues is often said to be 'time-consuming' (and therefore an unnecessary bottleneck for speedy delivery of programmes) and many agencies do not have internalised strategies to make sure that women are part of any intervention that they plan.

There is, however, an increasing attempt on the part of relief agencies to ensure involvement of women in relief distribution efforts, in terms of identification of beneficiaries etc. This approach suffers from what can be called the 'benevolent' attitude of the agencies concerned with the sole purpose of satisfying 'welfaristic' egos. Need for women's participation from a human rights perspective is mostly neither understood nor stressed. As there is increasing pressure from donors and aid agencies to include gender dimensions, local agencies invariably end up ensuring participation of women in terms of 'number' but not in terms of planning and decision-making.

When it comes to ensuring women's participation in disaster management planning and decision-making, the attitude of 'it's-their-responsibility' creeps in. Aid agencies expect that the NGOs whom they support should have adequate number of women staff involved in the planning process etc. without really looking at their own staffing pattern. Similarly, the NGOs during the village meetings insist that there is representation of women in the village committees without taking care to ensure that they have women staff in their own organisations playing facilitating roles.

## VII. GENDER INTEGRATION IN GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMES

Women constitute one of the most vulnerable sections in society. For addressing their problems and improving their condition, more gender-sensitive Governments programmes are needed. The response strategies do not facilitate equitable roles pertaining to decisions regarding cash-for-work and food-for-work programmes, service benefits like agriculture loans, the Public Distribution System ration supply etc. Though survey information relating to government programmes are collected from women, they are alienated from subsequent decision-making. The Government declares equal wage rates for men and women; yet, invariably women's daily earnings are lower than those of men. Moreover, at the work site there are no support facilities like crèches for children. Women have to take their infants along to work sites and take care of them; this results both in a lower volume of work being done, and less attention paid to the infants.

There have also been several instances in which women were included as committee members (at times in important positions such as presidents) in the Government programmes, but the officials themselves and the men in the village saw the women's roles as supplementary and thus did not seek women's participation. There have been instances in which women's participation was ensured at the beginning of the programme in terms of number, but the roles they were allowed to play were supplementary and subsequently not so pronounced as was intended. With the recent constitutional reservation of one third of elected local body and Panchayat seats for women, a large number of women have been elected to Panchayats in Orissa thus ensuring that there are far more women in public space, but what is lacking is the capacity building that should have been taken up. There are many instances in which the decisions of the elected women have been directed. In the absence of the required skills, women invariably end up playing second fiddle to the men in the house who are then quite visible playing the role of 'Sarapanch' in the village, by dominant husbands, male colleagues, and Government officials. Gender issues are not suitably in Goverment programmes. The above is mainly due to poor sensitisation and absence of suitable orientation for the staffs of Government.

## VIII. PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AFFECTED BY DISASTERS

In spite of all the added workloads, and stress that the women undergo, the public portrayal of women affected by disasters is that of a hapless, not-able-to-help-themselves, and weak victims. There is extremely poor understanding and acknowledgement of the difficult roles they have to play. This results in the women continuing to be neglected in the public space and being banished to the background as usual.

## **IX. OPPORTUNITIES THAT ARE CREATED**

Disasters also provide women with several opportunities for social change, and there are many instances of women being positively impacted during disasters. The position of women in society can be challenged and changed in post-disaster periods: Organisations of women to form groups and take up relief and rehabilitation activities in the villages, role of women volunteering to undertake community restoration activities, acquisition of new skills by women, access to information and institutions to which they did not have access earlier are some of the ways through which the traditional roles get changed and for the better.

Some of the specific examples through which such opportunities could be said to have been created are given below.

1. Experiences of many NGOs clearly mention the change of identity that women have assumed before and after disasters. They play much more visible community roles, are more aware of their rights, are able to better articulate their needs and roles, and most important, emphasising the fact that they have an equally important role to play as men.
2. Women's access to information available with the block and other Government offices have increased during post drought periods. Absence of men in the houses has forced women to travel to government offices and seek information.
3. Women could access public distribution system better in a drought period.
4. Formation of self-help groups in large number in the disaster affected areas to take up livelihood restoration activities etc. Exemplary leadership, management skill and resilience have been demonstrated by many such groups who have carved out a permanent place at community level.
5. Women volunteers were trained by NGOs in issues such as safe water and sanitation, public hygiene, relief management, leadership, account keeping, income generation activities etc.
6. Several women-focussed interventions such as income generation activities for women have created an opportunity for economic empowerment and financial independence.
7. Insistence on women's participation (even in terms of number alone to start with) by Government and NGOs has ensured that women become a permanent part of the community social-scape through representation in committees etc.

## X. GENDER INTEGRATION IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT- ROAD AHEAD

Integrating a gender perspective into emergency responses requires different approaches:

- Clarity about underlying principles, which may be formalized in policy guidelines
- Systematic social and gender analysis in a given context
- Systems and procedures which are recognised on the ground as good practice
- Agreement on minimum standards

Following are some of the areas that warrant attention so as to address the issue of mainstreaming women's participation and role in disaster management.

1. A sustained strategy for awareness creation on disaster preparedness must include a substantial inclusion of gender perspectives. The strategy could be that framed and worked upon by the Government or by those of local and international NGOs.
2. Analysis of disaster vulnerability of communities must take into accounts gendered understanding of the impact the disasters are likely to cause. Since risk and vulnerability are rooted in a complex play of physical, social, economic, and environmental factors and men and women are affected differently.
3. Women's inclusion in planning and decision making for disaster reduction as well as response. Participation needs to be ensured both at the local level (beneficiary, community) and the level of the NGOs and Governments who are in the business of disaster management.
4. There is a great deal of skill gap that currently exists between men and women in terms of the ability to prepare and respond to disasters. This should be addressed forthrightly so as to bring about changes in approaches.
5. Disasters provide great opportunities too- to break from the tradition and carve new niches for women. Agencies responding to disasters must be able to identify such opportunities and take advantage of them.
6. Sustainable development would not be achievable if disasters are continuing to take place and affecting the people the same way. Prevention and mitigation of disasters and preparedness elements need to be integrated into the sustainable

development processes. Mainstreaming of gender dimensions is pertinent for both and needs to be included.

7. Psycho-social therapy for women affected during disasters and other special needs must be made integral part of disaster response strategies.

Some of the international processes that recognise and provide policy as well as practical guidelines for gender mainstreaming in disaster management are as follows.

1. Agenda 21 framed for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, 26th August to 4th September 2002
2. International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction and the Yokohama "Action Plan for the 21st Century for a Safer World" (1994)
3. International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (2000)
4. Beijing Platform for Action (1995)
5. Expert meeting organised by the Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction along with the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women- Environment Management and the Mitigation of Natural Disasters: A Gender Perspective, Ankara, Turkey, from 6th to 9th November 2001.

*Rising from the wreckage: Emergence of women leaders*



*Picking up new skills*





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