

# Picking up the pieces after Cyclone Fani

The cyclone battered Bhubaneswar and Puri last week, leaving behind a trail of destruction. **Jacob Koshy** and **Satyasundar Barik** report on the efforts by the government and relief teams to restore normalcy

Shattered windowpanes, sturdy trees lying flat on the roads, and downed power lines are the prominent markers of Cyclone Fani, which pounded Puri and Bhubaneswar in Odisha on May 3. Three days after Fani, categorised as an 'extremely severe cyclonic storm', ploughed through the State killing at least 40 people and injuring 160, the streets of Bhubaneswar are filled with workers of the National Disaster Response Force, dressed in bright orange. Senthil Rao, 28, and five others have spent all morning trying to remove an uprooted banyan tree. "It is an old tree and has blocked an entire stretch of the main road. My work seems interminable," Rao groans during a tea break.

This is Rao's tenth tree since early morning. It's largely due to the efforts of 600 teams of the State and Central disaster response forces that the city roads are navigable now. Tree trunks and branches have been swept into mounds and line the sidewalks and street corners. There are so many of them that the government has permitted anyone, with the means and the men, to cart them away and use them as fit without the usual tendering and bureaucracy.

There is little public and private transport on the streets; only the bulky JCBs can be seen in corners and inner streets. They are clawing out crumbled billboards and the remnants of carts and tyres from the rubble, and lifting logs. Santosh Rout, who manages a fleet of JCBs, says that he has been charging a 30% premium for the use of his machines. "The demand is very high. However, I hear there are nearly 30 teams of JCBs commissioned, so it looks like things will be normal in less than a week," he says.

Fani, which started out in the Bay of Bengal in the last week of April, was quite unlike the typical storms that Odisha is accustomed to. From 1965 to 2017, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea collectively registered 46 'severe cyclonic storms'. More than half of them occurred between October and December. Seven of them occurred in May and only two (in 1966 and 1976) were recorded in April, according to data from the India Meteorological Department's cyclone statistics unit. Before Fani, only one of them (in 1966) had actually made landfall over India.

While modern, meteorological record-keeping dates furious cyclones in Odisha to as far as back to 1831, to the average citizen, in contemporary times 1999 marked the turning point for the State. The cyclone that hit that year was catastrophic: it killed thousands, obliterated homes, and left a trail of destruction. The State was cut off from the rest of the country, and it was weeks before the magnitude of the tragedy hit home. Since then, Odisha has prepared itself in various ways to face such cyclones – by building specially crafted storm shelters and commissioning electric poles that are designed to withstand strong gales.

By May 1, the weather department was confident that Fani would be unforgiving, but not as powerful as BOB 06 (cyclones then didn't have names) that had hit the port town of Paradip in 1999.

## Capital without power

Since Bhubaneswar is bald without tree cover after Fani, the heat and humidity are more palpable than before. There is no power, to add to the woes, so the city after dusk is both dark and uncomfortable. While city-specific figures aren't available, the State Disaster Management Authority estimates that at least 45,000 km of power lines and 11,000 distribution transformers have been destroyed by the cyclone.

Sarath Chandra, a hotel manager, says that normally in early May, when the tourist season is just beginning, his hotel is only about 60% full. "This time we're nearly 85% full," he says. "There are no outstation tourists. All of them are locals escaping the heat of their homes." Chandra's hotel is among those equipped with a diesel-generation set, which means that there is a steady supply of water and electricity.

"The air conditioner in the room doesn't cool but being here is better than being at home," says Dolly Patra, who is staying with her family at Chandra's hotel. Her second floor flat, barely 3 km from the hotel, is a cauldron, she explains. Power is expected to return only after a fortnight, and water supply is irregular. When the cyclone howled through her apartment complex, she was scared for herself and her infant. "I was terrified that the asbestos sheets nearby would smash into my bedroom," she says. After the storm she stayed put at home, but mosquitoes entered her home in droves and she was afraid that her child would fall sick. "I hope to get back home soon or move to a relative's place. Staying in a hotel is expensive for us," she says.

At the Secretariat of the Odisha State Disaster Management Authority (OSDMA), Bishnupada Sethi presides over a crew of officers who compile and coor-



Cyclone Fani killed at least 40 people in Odisha and injured 160. Penthakata village in Puri after the storm. (Below) Debris on train tracks at a railway station in Puri. ■ BISWANJAN ROUT/AFF



dinate information with district centres and the IMD. Details of damage, relief dispensed and lacunae are continually wired to Sethi's office. While the unit's coordination has earned plaudits – from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the United Nations – Sethi says that in spite of the preparation and the "memories of 1999", citizens were "mentally unprepared" for the impending disaster. "This is a State where cyclones recur. At the State level, there are plans and a standard operating procedure to deal with the eventuality. However, many were unprepared. In fact, many people refused to leave their thatched houses and go to shelters," he notes.

**Anger in Puri**  
Its stature as a capital city and the prevalence of concrete houses may have contributed to zero casualties, according to official figures, in Bhubaneswar, but the temple town of Puri, which is about 60 km away, presents a vastly different picture.

National Highway 316 that connects the two cities is smooth; it was spared Fani's wrath. However, on both sides of the highway lie uprooted coconut trees and houses with holes in their tiled roofs. At least 21 deaths have been reported in Puri district.

Not far from the beach, where the sea is now placid, anger is growing at the government shelter near Talabaniya in Puri town. This pink building is one among the 879 constructed by the Odisha government across Puri, Cuttack and Khordha. The two-storey buildings, designed in 2004 with assistance from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, are low-cost and capable of accommodating about 3,000 people. They are resilient to wind speeds greater than 200 kmph. The Talabaniya shelter is also equipped with an alarm and a horn. In the event of an impending storm, instructions are relayed to those living in thatched houses, or the homeless, to come to the shelter.

"There were warnings on the day before the cyclone struck and many of us came to the shelter," says Pintu Pradhan, who works in a nearby hotel. "A day before the storm, we were given rice and dal. On the day of the storm we were given packed dry fruits, chuda (flattened rice) and gur (jaggery).

There's been no food ever since." Pradhan's house, along with the houses of about 700 others of the Biju Nagar slum, was reduced to rubble. Only those with "food security cards" says Pradhan, were eligible for the Chief Minister's relief package of ₹2,000 and 50 kg of rice per month as well as polythene sheets that could be used as roofs. There were families who lost everything in the storm and now have no food, water or jobs, he says.

While Pradhan and several men, most of them daily wage labourers, rue the absence of primarily benefits, the women of Biju Nagar trek a kilometre to the grounds of the government technical training institute to collect fallen branches and twigs to use as firewood. The trunks are also useful to rebuild houses, one of them points out. Another group of women has congregated at the Puri Collectorate to protest against the unavailability of food and water. Due to the absence of an effective communication system, the promised welfare and supplies are not making their way to the people, says Shanti, one of the protesters. As part of relief measures, residents are eligible for up to ₹95,000 for 'fully damaged' structures and compensation for damage to agricultural and horticultural crop, and fisheries.

Balwant Singh, the Puri District Collector, who assumed charge on May 7, says the lack of power and telecommunication has hampered access to supplies. "There's a standard operating procedure in place. Setting up free kitchens near shelters and restoring road connectivity are our immediate priorities. For all that we need to have

the communication system with Bhubaneswar running smoothly," he adds.

## The problem of communication

With mobile phone connection down, the Collectorate, with its compound walls and plantations hit, is relying on a ham radio network. Ramesh Kuthumbaka, a Hyderabad-based advocate and an amateur ham operator, says he was called by OSDMA on May 1. "Two ham radio colleagues and I left Hyderabad and travelled 1,200 km by road in a Qualis to reach OSDMA and set up a ham network. We struggled to come here, there were strong winds. We reached on May 3," he recounts. Another team of ham operators from Kolkata reached the Puri Collectorate and installed a radio station. "Since then we've been helping the State authorities with transmitting and receiving instructions. The Chief Secretary relied on our network. There was nothing else," he claims. Kuthumbaka has skipped many meals. He complains of the lack of support from the district administration. "There doesn't seem to be a well-thought-out plan. For instance, in spite of knowing fairly reliably by April 27 that Odisha would be hit, we were told only on the 1st," he says. However, he will be present in Puri "as long as he is needed".

Sethi points out that the "operational difficulties" and the sheer magnitude of the devastation would mean that returning to normalcy will take weeks. Nearly 100 million kg of rice was reaped beforehand, yet distribution is tardy, he says. "We had to evacuate about 1.4 million people within 12 hours. Nearly 200 lakh SMSes were sent to various levels of administration – right down to

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BISHNUPADA SETHI  
Odisha State Disaster Management Authority

the village heads of 14 districts," he says. He explains why people were mobilised into action only by May 1: "Remember, this was after the election exercise, itself an arduous task, had just concluded on April 29. Officers and the administration are human too."

Another challenge, adds Sethi, was to convince people to leave their homes and rush to the shelters. "Often they wouldn't listen. We have seen it here every time there has been a cyclone. People say they will weather the storm and then they all suffer."

In Brahmagiri town in Puri, a block-level official says that in the administrative block of Bhagawat Patna, nearly 27,289 people had to be evacuated. "Many of them refused to come, saying Lord Jagannath would keep them safe," he recounts. "There were four deaths, but it's not confirmed if they were specifically due to the cyclone."

The custodians of Jagannath say they are dealing with their own worries. Fani didn't spare the Jagannath temple in Puri, the mainstay of the town. One of the key idols is damaged and losses to some of the temple's property amount to ₹5 crore, reckons S. Chatterjee, a temple administration official. However, the temple itself is not participating in any

relief work or donating any of its corpus to the State to help with rehabilitation. The temple administration receives, on average, ₹2 lakh per day as donation but was expecting help from the government and individuals to prepare for the annual Rath Yatra in July. The long stretch of road, where the idols are carted, is largely clear. "Since the cyclone hit, daily offerings have plummeted. In the first two days, after the storm we barely got ₹700 on an average," Chatterjee says.

In the artisanal village of Raghurajpur, on the outskirts of Puri, the 100-odd families skilled in the art of *pattachitra* (painting on palm leaf) while away their time. In their part of town, Cyclone Fani brought rain and destroyed some of the paintings. Each painting takes about a day to make, says Gauranga Maharana, an artist who is in the midst of painting a wood-carved swan when we meet him. "The winds and the rain were so strong that my paintings got soaked. Paintings worth nearly ₹20,000 have been damaged," he says. Maharana, who traces his artistry to "several generations", estimates that a usual summer day brings in close to a thousand tourists (Raghurajpur is a heritage village), but now with the State battered, the number of tourists, both Indians and foreigners, has dwindled.

## The cyclones of May

Housed in a single-storey building, the walls of which are plastered with charts describing El Nino, warming seas and other climate phenomena, the scientists at the State headquarters of the IMD are working in the corridors and verandahs to escape the stifling heat. Habibur Rehman Biswas, the chief scientist of the department, says he hadn't left the office for 72 hours straight after May 1. "Initially, we thought it would be a typical summer cyclone of the Bay of Bengal. We thought it would go either towards Andhra Pradesh or turn towards Bangladesh and Myanmar and miss the Odisha coast. We were wrong."

Meteorologists note with worry that so-called recurring cyclones – ones that sharply turn eastwards – are becoming more frequent around the Indian Ocean. The IMD publicly disseminates information via a WhatsApp group that has senior district administration officials and media representatives. "We're always getting inputs, but with power gone, it's a bit slow. Still, there are other IMD agencies that pick up inputs and relay them. There will always be regular inputs, come what may," he says.

With Cyclone Fani gone, Rehman doesn't rule out the possibility of another strong cyclone. "There's nothing which says that such a strong storm won't lead to another one in a few weeks, though there aren't immediate indications yet. May is usually when there are many more cyclones."

