

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Vulnerabilities and Resilience in post-Fani Chilika: Lessons from the Field

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1. INTRODUCTION

Payal, a young married woman in her 20s, is a housewife in the village of Aloopatna who helps her husband in fishing and associated works. She speaks two languages other than Odiya – Hindi and Bengali, quite an exception in the village. She narrates in Hindi, how recent disasters and state apathy threatens the survival of every fishing family in Chilika. Her words simultaneously bespeak the fact that despite being subjected to frequent natural calamities, the Chilika lagoon presents an interesting ecosystem of dependence and survival, embedded within rich socio-cultural narratives.

The women of Aloopatna and Brahmapur welcome the guests with a traditional *arati thali* (a plate with sacred offerings), putting vermilion spots on their foreheads and offering them the beverages. The grim despair of their lives, associated with natural disasters, remains masked even as they welcome the guests.

The main objective of the field school programme in Chilika Lagoon, organized by the School of Enterprise, Environment and Development (SEED), University of Waterloo, the Rekhi Centre of Excellence for the Science of Happiness, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur and NIRMAN, was to understand the idea of resilience in disaster prone vulnerable communities of the lagoon. The fields of our study were two

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Published by Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE), c/o Institute of Economic Growth, University Enclave, North Campus, Delhi 110007.

ISSN: 2581-6152 (print); 2581-6101 (web).

villages – Brahmapur and Aloopatna, situated on the coast of the lagoon, both affected by cyclone Fani in May 2019.¹

2. ADAPTING IN A VOLATILE ENVIRONMENT

Resilience refers to the development of coping abilities in adverse situations that can be characterized as a continuation of several risk-prone situations that make communities vulnerable. Our field observations provided interesting insights into community lives. It presented us the ground realities beyond statistical reports that are important in formulating livelihood rehabilitation strategies in the post-disaster period. The roads of Brahmapur and Aloopatna, aflush with the uprooted trees and broken structures stood witness to the devastation people had endured. Many villagers in Brahmapur, where houses were destroyed, were living in makeshift shelters of tarpaulin roof covers.

Elderly women, primarily fishworkers, complained about the reduction in fish yield in the aftermath of the cyclone. The government has doled out abysmally low compensation, INR 3000 per affected household.

Communities are vulnerable irrespective of natural disasters. The villages of Chilika, too, encounter struggles in their daily lives with declining income from fishing and corporate encroachments, including fencing of designated fishing zones by powerful private lobbies at the cost of community fishing rights and access. The villagers continue to use coal as cooking fuel, which has a massive impact on the environment, as LPG cylinders are expensive. Housing allowances under Indira Awas Yojna were distributed based on a beneficiary's political affiliation. The number of cyclone shelters is also inadequate and needs maintenance, further revealing the despondency of the situation.

Despite multiple challenges, villagers refuse to leave the place as they consider the lagoon as their mother. They say that Chilika has taken care of them since they were small children, so, leaving the region would equate to abandoning their roots, they say. Coping mechanisms in the aftermath of Fani are also largely attributed to this local socio-cultural belief system. Such coping strategies reveal not only their ability to overcome the trauma but also the desperation behind it.

¹ Fani was a category 4 cyclone that hit the Indian state of Odisha on 3 May 2019, mostly affecting Puri and Khordha district. Claimed to be the strongest tropical cyclone since the supercyclone of 1999, Fani left a trail of destruction of approximately Rs 24,176 crores in the state (India Today 2019).

Figures 1 and 2: Destruction caused by Fani in Brahmapur and Aloopatna



Picture courtesy: Author

3. GENDERED RENDERINGS

The women in Chilika shared an interesting relationship with the ecosystem. The concept of motherland among them transcends normative definitions: the lake is their land, livelihood and culture. A subtle practice of social forestry was noticed among the women of these villages. They only use dry fuelwood or leaves for household construction purposes as they believe the land surrounding Chilika is a holistic representation of the lake. In the midst of the cyclone, locked up in their houses and hearing the raging sounds, their only solace was prayers to *Ma Chilika*, who they consider their saviour. They sang hymns and songs to appease their mother and request her to protect them.

Women are proficient in making pickles, *papads*, curd and handicrafts that can find them a separate niche in the market. There are local Self-Help Groups (SHG) that have helped empower rural women by giving them the opportunities to transform their skills into an economic engagement. Omm Gayatri Jute Cluster (in collaboration with District Supply and Marketing Society (DSMS), Puri), run by a woman named Manasi, is an SHG where rural women sell home-made bags, purses and stationeries made of jute. All products are low-cost and biodegradable. Its SHG members' average earning is INR 5000, and a source of inspiration for the women in Brahmapur and Aloopatna. The women of Chilika do not take part in fishing but help in other associated works like cleaning boats and the fish. During a focused group discussion, it was apparent that the elderly women agreed with the men in the village that housewives should not be part of the employed workforce. However, women of the younger generation are eager to participate in various economic opportunities.

4. LIFE ROLLS ON...

The visits to the villages in Chilika provided a profound understanding of the challenges and resilience of the fishing communities. One of the key strategies required for building resilience in a vulnerable community is to have a detailed understanding of their socio-economic profile that is determined by specific political-economic imperatives of the statecraft. As the villagers said, the government officials visited the villages after Fani only to calculate the losses, there seems to be a lack of follow up procedures by the authorities in rehabilitating these communities into their regular livelihood. How can a person suffering from financial and identity crisis and frequent ecological trauma be compensated? Is the development of coping strategies among these communities in Chilika a result of the apathy towards vulnerable groups in rural regions?

The divisiveness among the communities as a result of the caste system and political affiliations makes them more exposed to the calamities. It is unfortunate how superstitious beliefs sometimes blur the lines between traditions or culture and ignorance, thus affecting survival practices. This can be realized through some of the narratives from Brahmapur, where people chose to stay in the island, partly due to miscommunication but mainly because they believed God would will save them, despite the alerts from the government. By the time they realized the danger, it was impossible to get on the boats arranged by the government to get them on the mainland as the waves in the lake had turned violent.

However, having faced such massive destruction, the people aren't devoid of hope. According to them, surviving Fani has given them the will to endure more. Women seemed much more receptive of engaging in the workforce after our visit. Formulating backup livelihood strategies can provide them a safety net to cope up with the challenges without devoicing their identity and relationship with Chilika.

5. CONCLUSION

While leaving Brahmapur, a young boy who had come with his mother in the FGD, lightly pulled my sleeve and asked me something in Odiya. As I looked for someone to translate, he grew impatient and left with his mother. One of the women in the group, who could speak broken Hindi, translated that the little boy was asking if before leaving the place, I can help them in rebuilding his school that was used as a cyclone shelter and is now in need of repair. As I recalled the boy's desperation and impatience, I wondered how many interactive academic groups he has been part of to have developed such impatience. Recollecting the tragedy to answer queries from academics, year after year while receiving no concrete solution can be understandably exhausting and add to the trauma of the community.

It is imperative that academics share a collective responsibility of giving something back to these communities- through some tangible action plans that might benefit them in future disaster scenarios. Such action plans might be informed by an understanding of the current challenges, making people aware of possible causes and providing them with simple strategies that would alleviate their problems in the long run.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Jenia Mukherjee and Amrita Sen gave suggestions on the initial drafts of this article. The author also acknowledges Priyadarshi Patnaik, Coordinator, Rekhi Centre of Excellence for the Science of Happiness, IIT Kharagpur and Prateep Nayak, SEED, the University of Waterloo for providing her with the opportunity to participate in the week-long field school in Chilika, Odisha. The residents of Aloopatna and Brahmapur are deeply acknowledged for being generous with their time in giving us, and to the larger world, the opportunity to know their challenges and dreams.

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