Focus 58 – **Crawling Back to Normalcy: The Super Cyclonic Storm 'Amphan' Brings West Bengal to a Complete Halt**

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Abstract

The onset of the super cyclonic storm Amphan in West Bengal, India, was a package of petrifying winds, consistent rainfall, collapsing trees, overflowing sewages, shattered glass windows, blown off roofs and many other things to recall and revisit. The Super Cyclonic Storm 'Amphan' was a powerful and deadly tropical cyclone which caused widespread damage in West Bengal and Bangladesh on 20th May 2020. Regions such as Kolkata, Hooghly, Howrah, East Midnapur, North 24 Parganas, and South 24 Parganas in West Bengal were all massively affected by the cyclone. It also caused significant destruction in Bangladesh and parts of Odisha.

This article is an 'ethnographic' account of the experience of the Amphan winds and the collateral damage affecting the social and ecological structure at large. The article intends to enlighten the extent of damage and the recovery process after the catastrophe. Additionally, it is held that the state along with its citizens must contribute with rational/efficient ideas towards the protection and preservation of the environment - especially when global warming lies at such a tipping point.

Remembering the Onslaught of Amphan

Slater, 2020). Previously, the IMD had alerted the Chief Ministers of West Bengal and Odisha to evacuate residents living near coastal regions and advised fishermen not to venture out into the sea. In a prolonged media briefing, the IMD Executive, Dr. Mrutyunjay Mohapatra, categorized Amphan as an 'extremely severe cyclonic storm' with a wind speed of 165-177 Kmph (IMD, 2020). Incidentally, it was the strongest tropical cyclone to strike the Ganges Delta since the Sidr in 2007 and the first super cyclonic storm to occur in the Bay of Bengal since the 1999 Odisha cyclone.

The lull before the storm was particularly peculiar on 20th May 2020, when climatic conditions roughly changed from humidity to a sudden drop in temperature followed by pleasant winds in the red alerted areas of West Bengal. Residents were amazed to see on that dreadful day the sky turn from blue-to-grey-to-black followed up by a catching up of wind speed. Simultaneously there were hourly announcements by local authorities, with a list of precautions such as the closing of doors and windows, removing of pots from balconies, charging phones and battery banks, and stocking up of essential - especially in the regions alerted by the IMD. This advisory was largely circulated in the urban areas of West Bengal, whereas in coastal and rural areas the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) was taking precautionary measures and shifting 5 lakh people out of the low-lying area. Before the onset of the storm, the NDRF had deployed 41 teams in affected states to mitigate the crisis and helped lakhs of people relocate to safer zones.

As the storm made its landfall near Sunderbans, West Bengal, wind speed reached 155 to 165 kmph - gusting to 185 kmph. The winds gradually moved towards the southeast of Bengal. Streetlights were turned off for the districts of Howrah, Hooghly, Kolkata, South & North 24 Paraganas and East & West Midnapore. By 7 PM (Indian Standard Time), the winds started blowing at a speed of 110 kmph, making noises when coming in touch with any surface, to the extent that they often banged doors and windowpanes.

The magnitude of nature's revenge was such that extensive damage was inflicted to all types of mud-houses and some damage to old or poorly managed red brick structures. Other phenomena included the potential threat from flying objects; the uprooting of communication and power poles; the disruption of rail/road link at several places; extensive damage to standing crops, plantations, and orchards; falling palm and coconut trees; uprooted large bushy trees; and large boats and ships torn from their moorings.

Causing over US$13 billion of damage, Amphan is also the costliest cyclone ever recorded in the North Indian Ocean, surpassing the record held by Cyclone Nargis of 2008. The high-speed cyclonic winds were felt up till 10:00 PM (Indian Standard Time) - and after the wind speed reduced, the rainfall continued. The residents of red alert areas noticed a whirlpool of winds along with thunderstorms and smashing rains on the wall of residential buildings. During the assault of the storm, many houses complained of water entering their bedrooms through windows and balconies. They added that the force of the wind was such that often glass windows were shattered on the marble flooring, creating a pool of water that hampered furniture and electronic items. Simultaneously, some residential complexes had reported long hours of power cuts, no water supply and mobile phone networks being snapped.

Interestingly, those areas that suffered a power cut before the onset of the storm continued to live in dark zones for 6 days or more and in other areas the power cut was done only on 20th May at night. Areas within Hooghly, Howrah and Kolkata have complained that waterlogging has resulted in the falling of electrical poles/ transformers and trees in public spaces, which created obstruction to movement as well. Live wires swimming on the water resulted in many deaths and injuries across the state. As per government records, the death toll related to the Amphan assault as of now stands at 98 citizens, with lakhs of people living out of the safety net of essential items such as food, water, electricity and medical services (PTI, 2020). Stagnant water in residential areas can be appeal to dengue mosquitoes, wild snakes, and other animals. This will constitute a double whammy situation for the state, which is currently steering a tough conquest between the Amphan's woes and the COVID crisis (Mazumdar, 2020).

The Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, and her political aides continued to monitor the situation closely and conducted a press conference late in the night. It was stated that devastation by Amphan is incomprehensible and financial support was requested from the Government of India.

After Amphan, where does the City of Joy stand

Metaphorically, the City of Joy became a City of despair: Kolkata was beaten black and blue by the severe cyclonic winds. The images showed that enormous trees fell on buses and cars, damaging public spaces to a great extent. The mobile towers of Airtel, Jio, Vodafone and others had collapsed in many places. Cable Tv lines and Wi-Fi connections

were either completely shattered into pieces or were submerged in deep sewerage waters. On 21st May morning no phone networks were operational, and one could not reach out to their near ones either. Many shops were closed or even ran out of supplies. For example, in many parts of the state, the supply of milk was extremely skewed.

Similarly, in Serampore (Danish colony) in the Hooghly district capsizing of ferry boats in the Ganges were reported. Residents living close to the holy Ganga river reported that water levels increased, resulting in many mud houses (*kachcha* homes) being washed away. The high-rise buildings of Kolkata reported that the wind often made them feel like living in a pendulum situation, much akin to earthquake tremors. They also reported short circuits in electrical poles, which caused major damage to buildings and trees as well.

In posh parts of Kolkata, a lack of drinking water and insufficient water supply for household chores were reported. Residents of urban areas even complained to social media portals that the restoration of electrical lines was structured in such a manner that politicians' and bureaucrats' homes enjoyed full electricity while the rest lived in complete darkness. There were reports on media portals describing residents' protests against the lackadaisical attitude of electricians, councillors, and sweepers to restore normalcy in highly affected areas. Some local newspapers reported that the state did not have electrical cutters to cut the trees fallen on roads and public spaces. Citizens also argued that the IMD had raised an alert much before the outbreak of Amphan, yet the administration never prepared adequately to mitigate the crisis. For example, a state-run media channel reported an episode wherein villagers thrashed the Sarpanch (Head of the Village Panchayat System/ Governance) of Kakdwip (affected by the cyclone) for failing to provide basic essential items kept them safe and sound for powerholders' family members.

In the flux of debates and discussion among political leaders of different ideologies, one must notice that it is always the common man who suffers. One should also understand that the formation of arguments continues to remain archaic in nature. Political leaders shamelessly defend themselves by saying they neither had the supplies nor staff and certainly no financial strength to mitigate the Amphan assault. Yet the state did create an Amphan relief fund to help those most affected by the catastrophe.

The terrible pictures of people living without proper sheds on their homes, foods or crops being destroyed by stagnant water, books scattered on the famous College Street, children crying out of hunger and many other emotionally driven moments result in mankind

helping each other in such dark times. Even the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, found herself in a dilemma as managing the crisis multiplied its challenges along with the COVID situation. For a political authority either at the centre or state level, it is always difficult to choose between the two or even at least strike a balance, especially with skewed financial and personnel strength. In such times, Narendra Modi's government decided to donate about 1000 crore rupees to West Bengal (after an aerial survey) for uplifting the state from the post cyclonic crisis. Subsequently, donations were made to the West Bengal Chief Minister's relief fund. Given that we are discussing a state with an about 10.09 crore population, the donated amount for relief funds may appear to be low, but it can at least help in the process of rehabilitation and restoration of displaced communities and ecological areas. Moreover, The European Union (EU) announced on Friday an initial funding of €500,000 to assist India in dealing with the devastation (Chaudhury, 2020). It will address the immediate needs of populations affected by the cyclone, as well as protect humanitarian aid and health workers from their exposure to the epidemic. The EU also announced €1,100,000 to support the immediate response in Bangladesh.

To assist State officials and the NDRF with a quicker response to the Amphan-related destruction, the State has deployed the army as well. In the wake of destruction, the responsibility of the army concerns the restoration of essential services and infrastructure. They are equipped with road and tree clearance machines that can speed up restoration.

The Lost Case of Mangrove and Communities of the Sunderbans

The impacts of Amphan is incomprehensible in both social and ecological domains. Apart from displacing people from their habitat, the storm has massively damaged the mangroves of the Sunderbans, considered as an UNESCO world heritage site and critical wetland. Geographically, it is the largest intact tract of mangrove swamp forest in the world and is particularly important as a wildlife habitat. It acts as a dampener when it comes to the outbreak of cyclones. When Amphan struck the Ganges delta, it flooded coastal communities and pushed water up to 15 km inland in parts of the Sundarbans. The IMD recorded winds of 150-160 km/hr. Thankfully, the cyclone wrought much less damage because of the delta's mangroves. The Sunderbans provide various ecosystem services to coastal communities. A series of studies in the early 2000s discovered that mangroves with an average height of 6-10 meters could shorten a cyclone's waves by 60%. Their roots form a complex interweave just above the soil. Together with the trees' trunks, they work like speed-breakers to slow tides.

In neoliberal times, deforestation, land-use change and human activities – including aquaculture and tourism – have reduced the extent and health of the Sundarbans' mangroves. Experts think this deterioration played a part in Amphan's effects being as deadly as they were. According to a recent study carried out by the DECMA (Delta Vulnerability and Climate Change: Migration and Adaptation), in the aftermath of Aila, between 2014 and 2018, it was found out that 64% of migration from the Sundarbans region happened due to economic distress resulting out of unsustainable agricultural practices (Mukhopadhayay, 2020). Climate change is expected to render bad storms worse in the future, and more frequently so, as well as elevate the sea level. And as the Sundarbans, and mangroves across India in general, continue to shrink in the face of infrastructure development, urbanization and agricultural land conversion, the country's coastal and near-coastal communities will only fare worse.

Mangroves need freshwater to maintain the estuarine conditions they thrive in. But as sea-levels rise, the swamps become more saline, prompting some tree species to move further inland, which in turn affects their roots. The increasing prevalence of barrages, dams and upstream diversions only makes this problem worse. Dams and barrages also reduce the number of sediments reaching the mangroves, contributing to coastal erosion (Ranganathan, 2020).

Moreover, a considerate amount of investments must be done to protect the mangroves of the Sunderbans, which attract over 2 lakh tourists in a year. The amount generated from tourism, along with gradual investments, can further scale up services such as bookings, accommodations, a supply of water and food availability. It's a jackpot location for West Bengal - if managed and financed properly it can reap huge benefits in the future, not just economically, but also as an example as to how a UNESCO heritage site can be preserved and restored.

Final Thoughts

A State like West Bengal, which faces the wrath of cyclones periodically, must be prepared well in advance of outbreaks such as Aila, Fani, or even Amphan. A Proper drainage system must be created to ensure that waterlogging does not take in residential complexes. The very idea of rainwater harvesting must be taken up earnestly by residential welfare associations. The state along with the RWAs can engage individuals in the plantation of trees whose roots shoot deep inside the ground such as Banyan, Neem, Mango, and Peepal.

The fear of them collapsing in public spaces will be less and they can provide much needed cool shade for onlookers.

Moreover, West Bengal's power utility company, the CESC (Calcutta Electrical Supply Cooperation), asserts the use of solar energy as way to at least provide some level of electricity to homes which have suffered many hours of prolonged power cuts. The State can also engage the private sector (through corporate social responsibility initiatives) in such critical times to set up water ATM's for public use. Moreover, the state can intercept on young cadre or party workers who would be entrusted with the responsibility of providing essential services at doorsteps during the climatic cataclysm. The public at large will always reminiscence those moments when emotional and well-being support is extended to them by political authorities. Pursuing politics of welfare in a segmented fashion entails structured voting patterns with minuscule chances of forming government at either the centre, state, or local levels.

A state must generate revenues to buy important supplies used for clearances of trees and roads and not rely on neighbouring states for help. It must ensure that political responsibility is not like a football that changes its goalpost from time to time. The onus of people's welfare is a key responsibility for lawmakers, who need to rise above his or her crude private interests. Inconsiderate motives can be one of the reasons as to why many places in West Bengal continued to live for over 2 days without electricity or water. The very denial of necessities of life completely abolishes the fundamental premises of Democracy.

With the world at large suffering from global climate change, states at large must pool in more stakeholders from Non-Governmental Organizations and ecological activists who can provide interesting inputs to combat storms and save the planet at large. Holistically, individuals must not see the environment and its changing moods as associated with celebrating a specific environment day or earth hour, or with planting trees, or with the ozone layer. We need to move beyond these compartmentalized opinions towards a sustainable environment, because the concerns are real, and they need practical solutions with an immense level of determination and integrity. Third-party actors can always lead the way by making us understand the efficacy of nature and include the very idea of 3 R's (Restore, Regenerate, and Recycle) within our lives.

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