

Role of Caste and Gender in the Context of Disaster Response: A Case Study of Super Cyclone in Jagatapada, Orissa

by

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Amidst the destruction of the cyclone, Radha, a Khandayat (high caste) woman delivered a boy child, later named as Red Cross. Lalita Devi, a senior Dalit woman, acted as a midwife in the absence of any medical aid.

Radha reported that since the birth of her son, a bond has developed between her and Lalita Devi

→ Disasters challenge the existing social hierarchies, and can create new relations and structures in society

- Disasters are often sudden and destructive (crisis conditions)
- Alongside physical spaces, disasters also deconstruct the social/cultural spaces
- Can create a potential for social change, and even act as a catalyst


Jagatapada

Completely devastated by the 1999 Super Cyclone

Population is entirely Hindu: apart from inter-caste hierarchies, strong intra-caste hierarchies

Higher caste women are bound by strict norms and rituals of the private sphere

Disadvantageous economical conditions push lower caste women into more public roles



Methodology

- The research used both qualitative and quantitative methods
- Field observation, semi-structured interviews, KIIs(10), FGDs(4 groups) and household surveys were conducted for primary data

Profile of the respondents

Gender	Brahman	Khandayat	Scheduled Caste	Dalit	Total
Women	9 9.0%	7 7.0%	34 34.0%	50 50.0%	100
Men	2 6.7%	4 13.3%	9 30.0%	15 50.0%	30
Total	11 8.5%	11 8.5%	43 33.1%	65 50.0%	130

The Role of Caste and Gender Hierarchies During and Immediately After the Super Cyclone

- Most women were not informed about the cyclone alert
Greater isolation, lesser mobility, other restrictions often cut off women's access to information
- Initially women were hesitant to evacuate without their men but eventually had to
Lack of decision-making power at the household level
- The Dalit community decided to move towards the shelter in a big group
The lower castes gain strength through collective organization
- Instances of different caste groups helping each other
Contraction of the social distance/ brotherhood of pain
- The lower caste women had less trouble adapting to the shelter environment
Prior exposure to the public sphere

Support Received in Evacuation Stage (by caste groups)

Castes	No	%	Yes	%	Total
Brahman	9	81.8	2	18.2	11
Khandayat	7	63.6	4	36.3	11
Scheduled Castes	35	81.3	8	18.6	43
Dalit	53	81.5	12	18.5	65
Total	104	80	26	20	130

→ In evacuation stage, not much difference reported by caste groups...

Support Received in Evacuation Stage (by sex)

Sex	No	%	Yes	%	Total
Women	94	94.0	6	6	100
Men	10	33.3	20	66.7	30
Total	104	80	26	20	130

→ ...but significant differences reported based on gender

Caste and Gender Based Analysis of Discrimination Experienced when Receiving Relief Materials


	Men				Women				Total			
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Brahman	2	100%	0	0%	4	44%	5	56%	6	55%	5	45%
Khandayat	3	75%	1	25%	0	0%	7	100%	3	27%	8	73%
Schedule Castes	8	89%	1	11%	19	56%	15	44%	27	63%	16	37%
Dalit	13	87%	2	13%	40	80%	10	20%	53	82%	12	18%
Total	26	87%	4	13%	63	63%	37	37%	89	68%	41	32%

→ During the relief phase, lower caste groups reported relatively little discrimination, but **higher caste women** in particular reported feelings of discrimination

Gayatri, a Khandayat woman, on the relief phase:

'The initial relief phase was like the survival of the fittest. As a woman coming from a decent family, I could not fight like men or the lower caste women.'

(Jagatapada, FGD, July 2008)



In absence of their men, the higher caste women were at a loss when suddenly thrust into the chaotic relief phase

Kamla, a Dalit cyclone widow, on rehabilitation assistance:
'After making many rounds of the Block Development Office for more than three months, I realized that unless I pay a bribe to the officers, my ex-gratia will not go through.' (FGD, Aug. 2008)

Caste and Gender Based Analysis of Discrimination Experienced Regarding Compensation and Rehabilitation Assistance

	Men		Women		Total	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Brahman	1	50%	1	50%	4	44%
Khandayat	2	50%	2	50%	5	71%
Schedule Castes	4	44%	5	56%	8	24%
Dalits	8	53%	7	47%	0	0%
Total	15	50%	15	50%	17	17%

→ Dalits and women reported more discrimination

Long Term Recovery

Disasters often act as a catalyst for change:

'In the face of disruption people construct assessment, shape perceptions and invent explanations. After a disaster they recover and reconstruct. How they respond to the calamity or potential for a calamity both recount and reinvent their cultural system.' (Hoffman and Smith, 1999)

→ Often social changes are induced not only by disasters alone, but also the response that follows

- Following the Super Cyclone, there was a rush of international, national and local humanitarian organizations in Jagatapada
- After the initial relief phase, long-term rehabilitation was started
- Some stayed on to continue their community development initiatives...

Action Aid India's 'Sneha Abhijan': a capacity-building project with the backward communities

- **Vulnerabilities** of the marginalized communities identified; **advocacy programs** were started to build their capacities (legal and human rights, education, health, livelihood, others)
- The Dalits were previously not allowed inside the village temple

→ **The Dalit youth committee of the village instituted by Action Aid appealed to the Tehsildar court, which granted their long-denied right**

Restrictions experienced by the Dalits against worshipping at the local temple before and after the 1999 Super Cyclone

Gender	Before the Cyclone				After the Cyclone			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Women	47	94	3	6	50	7	14	43
Men	15	100	0	0	15	0	15	100
Total	62	95.3	3	4.6	65	7	10.7	58

The Red Cross Multi Purpose Shelter and its Community Based Disaster Management Program

The RCMPs has become the hub of the village:

- Different caste communities work together as volunteers
- Expansion of public roles of the lower caste women
- Increased inter-caste interactions
- Increased accessibility of lower castes into the higher caste spaces

→ **but only for men**

- Brahmanical patriarchy

→ **lower caste women still face discrimination in these spaces**



Conclusion

Traditional hierarchies get strained in extraordinary circumstances

Short term assistance was overall fair and equal to all caste groups

Except for compensation which was mostly a state affair, the Dalits did not report discrimination

This study of long term recovery (10 yrs. after the Super Cyclone) shows that caste-related norms have changed and the changes are long-lasting

→ **However, changes in gender-hierarchical norms were much more subtle, as this was rarely singled out by the humanitarian organizations (contrary to the caste norms)**

lower caste children from Samadhan--- all girls boarding school at the Red Cross Multi Purpose Shelter



THANK YOU