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A Fishing Community Recounts Evacuation Experience During Phailin

By [VIVEKANANDA NEMANA](#)

SRIKAKULAM, Andhra Pradesh — When police and government officials came to his village on Friday, begging residents to evacuate before Cyclone Phailin hit, B. Appa said he didn't believe them at first. In fact, almost no one did.

“Our village has seen hundreds of cyclones since the time of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers,” said Mr. Appa, 37, a fisherman in the coastal village of Bhavanapadu. “And we never had to leave the village before. We thought, ‘Why should we leave now?’”

Bhavanapadu is one of 237 coastal villages in Srikakulam district, in northern Andhra Pradesh, that were categorized as threatened by Cyclone Phailin. Here, as in other villages, officials overseeing the evacuation came up against a confounding problem: the villagers understood that a cyclone was coming, but they didn't think it would be bad enough to leave their homes and cattle behind.

As of the latest official estimates, at least 43 people nationwide have died during Cyclone Phailin and the floods it has caused, mostly in the states of Odisha, which was the worst hit, and Bihar. Two people died in Andhra Pradesh, both in the Srikakulam district: one woman was killed when the walls of her home collapsed on her, and another man died in a relief camp from an alcohol-related illness, according to official reports. The death toll is expected to rise in Bihar and Odisha as officials continue their relief efforts and reach more remote villages, but fatalities are likely to be far lower than 14 years ago when a powerful cyclone struck Odisha, then Orissa, in roughly the same area, killing 10,000 people.

On Saturday, the storm's maximum sustained winds, which were approximately 124 miles per hour when it made landfall about 9 p.m., had dropped to less than half that strength nine hours later. The cyclone was expected to dump up to 10 inches of rain over two days in some areas. By late

Sunday night, it had been downgraded from a cyclone to a depression, with sustained winds of 25 miles per hour and gusts of 34 miles per hour.

Across Srikakulam, 65,700 people were successfully evacuated from over 237 coastal villages; the government estimates that Cyclone Phailin impacted 360,000 people in the district. Officials said that the evacuation was possible only because of teamwork, leadership from the district collector and the intense nationwide effort to make sure people were shown to safety. But the hardest part, they said, may have been convincing coastal communities that if they didn't evacuate, their lives would be in danger.

"Our planning and execution was good, and our staff did a phenomenal job," said Saurabh Gaur, the Srikakulam district collector. "But we had to tell the villagers to move, and send in our police to make them move. In the long term, our biggest challenge will be for the villagers to understand and imbibe the community-based disaster management plan, and to know the consequences of a cyclone."

Officials from the police department, the district administration and the National Disaster Relief Force spent about 22 hours in Bhavanapadu evacuating 1,800 people. Most of that time was spent trying to persuade villagers to evacuate.

"The fishermen are not educated, so they have very conservative mindsets," said Baliah Katamgari, a Prime Minister's Rural Development fellow working in Srikakulam who was present for the evacuation of Bhavanapadu. "They just say, 'We have seen many cyclones like this; nothing will happen.' They have tremendous faith in their sea goddess. They have less faith in the government."

Fishermen here worship the ocean as Gangamma Thalli, or goddess of the sea. On Saturday morning, as the wind blew hard and the ocean raged, dozens of Bhavanapadu villagers walked to a small altar on the shore to pray to the goddess for protection.

"Just when people needed to move away from the water," said Mr. Katamgari, "some of the villagers were moving towards it for their puja," or prayers.

Simhasa Bacchala, a fisherman from Bhavanapadu, said they sacrificed a chicken as an offering to Gangamma Thalli. "We wanted her to protect us," he said. "We did not think the sea could harm us."

Many villagers were also worried about leaving behind their property, like their homes, their boats and their livestock. N. Ballewara, a farmer from the village of Vadapeta, less than a mile from Bhavanapadu, refused to evacuate so that he could take care of the cattle. He was among a group of 20 men who stayed back in the village in order to look after fishing boats, homes and livestock.

“If I set my cattle free and leave, they’ll eat all the crops. If I keep them tied up, they’ll die in the storm, and their lives are as precious as ours,” he said. “I thought, let’s see how bad this storm really gets. In any case, the government left us a vehicle in case we needed to flee.”

And the relief center where they would be staying, some residents said, was in a flood-prone area that was just as likely to be hit by the cyclone as their own village.

“The center was not in a safe zone; it would have been submerged as well,” said Ramarao Gorkala, 25. “So why go there to die when we could just live it out here, at home?”

After pleading for hours with unwilling villagers to relocate, the authorities said they began to use force, although no violence was involved. Under the National Disaster Management Act, district administrations may use force during a disaster in order to remove people from vulnerable areas.

“Ultimately, we had to catch and carry some people into the vehicles,” said C. Durga Prasad, the subinspector of police in charge of Bhavanapadu. “We caught whoever we could. They have certain beliefs not to leave their Gangamma Thalli, even though we were telling them the cyclone was going to be a danger to their lives.”

On Saturday afternoon, just hours before the cyclone made landfall, villagers said that a sudden surge in the sea level was what finally convinced them to evacuate.

“By midday, the sea came all the way up to the road,” said Sanhas Bayya, pointing to the main road in Bhavanapadu, which is over 300 meters from the coastline. “We never saw Gangamma Thalli come up that far. So we were scared and finally decided to leave.

“This was the first time I ever left my village,” added Mr. Bayya, a 50-year-old fisherman.

Residents in Bhavanapadu and the surrounding villages said that when the water came in, they saw seagulls, which are normally never seen around their village, catching fish around their homes.

“That was like a sign for us,” said Apparao Neela, a Bhavanapadu fisherman. “The birds never come this far unless something is really wrong.”

Thambayya Seejith, a farmer from the neighboring village of Madhyapeta, said he saw the wind blowing fast against the water. “It was as if the water and the wind were fighting,” he said, recalling waves over 10 meters in height. “And maybe that’s what saved us, and gave us the chance to evacuate.”

The ensuing rush to leave strained the evacuation’s capacity, so authorities scrambled to call in additional vehicles to accommodate villagers who suddenly were no longer skeptical.

Villagers said they were grateful for the officials’ persistence.

“They took us away in buses, they fed us, they took good care of us,” said R. Saroja, a shopkeeper in Bhavanapadu. “Since early morning the police were asking us to leave, but we didn’t listen. It was almost too late when we realized they were right.”

And although this time the evacuation was an unquestionable success, officials said the experience of villages like Bhavanapadu provided lessons on how to be better prepared in the future.

Mr. Katamgari — the Rural Development fellow, who hails from a fishing community in southern Andhra Pradesh, where he was the first to attend college — said that education was essential in preventing future disasters. “The vast majority of adults on the coast are illiterate. For them, it is very difficult to understand the nature of a cyclone itself,” he said. “They didn’t realize that because of the evacuation their lives are safe now.”

Dharmarao Kondagorri, a deputy collector of Srikakulam who oversaw the evacuation of 14,000 people from Vajrapukotturu, an administrative block comprising several villages, said that as climate change makes cyclones more destructive and more likely, the government needed to be prepared to evacuate many people for long periods of time.

“We need to plan for strong, permanent relief camps in safe areas that can accommodate tens of thousands of people,” he said. “In the future, there will

be a lot of turmoil with respect to these calamities because of global warming. The cyclones are just going to get bigger and bigger.”

The villagers of Bhavanapadu said they have learned their lesson. “Sometimes the government is right,” said B. Apparao, a fisherman from Bhavanapadu. “Sometimes the sea can get really frightening.”

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