

A Perfect Storm?

In the aftermath of Cyclone Hudhud, questions need to be raised about the role of urban planning in disaster-management preparedness

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Looking back at Cyclone Hudhud a month after it had hit the coast of Visakhapatnam in the Bay of Bengal in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, two things stand out. First, the cyclone was almost entirely composed of wind, with speeds crossing 200 kmph, while rainfall remained minimal. Even more importantly, there was no storm surge accompanying the cyclone's landfall (since it was a 'dry tropical cyclone'); had there been one, the consequences would have been unimaginably severe.

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The second striking characteristic about Hudhud can be summed up in one word—precision. There are two kinds of precision involved here. The first relates to the clinical precision and brutal swiftness with which the cyclone itself moved. Not only did it stick to its course, but it was also an example of pure 'shock-and-awe'. There was none of the usual indicators of an approaching storm—no days of cloudy skies, winds slowly gathering speed, rainfall moving from drizzles to torrents... Instead, the cyclone simply arrived at the precise moment it was scheduled to come, crossed the coast, did its damage and promptly petered out.

There was also a technological precision involved with Hudhud, a tribute to recent advances in meteorological science. Not only had

the cyclone been spotted in the Bay of Bengal nearly a week before it could wreak its havoc, but its trajectory was also plotted to an astonishing degree of accuracy that the exact time and place of its landfall was widely known almost three days before it hit land.

Therein lies the irony: this degree of precision caught people by surprise and left them totally unprepared for Hudhud. Used as they were to the fallacies of meteorological predictions, weather forecasts were not taken at face value.

This is not to suggest that apathy ruled the day. Over the last few years, a few cyclone warnings have turned out to be false alarms, but not before people were exposed to days of shrill proclamations from 'experts' warning of the 'mother-of-all-cyclones'. When a cyclone did eventually pass without leaving a huge trail of death and devastation in its wake—as has been the case on the last few occasions—there was almost a palpable sense of disappointment.

The government's evacuation of all vulnerable people to higher grounds pre-Hudhud also created some new problems. Concerns were raised about the security of home and hearth, the abysmally poor conditions in the cyclone shelters and official apathy.

Warnings ignored

While the government's efforts, over the years, have helped reduce the death toll from natural disasters, its continuing emphasis on saving people to the exclusion of everything else has not earned it too many admirers. All this meant that people were not willing to take the warnings about Hudhud readily.

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A quick look at the damages left behind by Hudhud is also revelatory in interesting ways. Forty-six people lost their lives, which, though tragic, is a significantly small number compared to past instances; much of the credit for that should surely go to the energetic efforts of the government. The damage to infrastructure along the coast, especially electricity, was huge. While both private and public properties were badly hit, the losses to the latter (including the swanky Visakhapatnam airport) were more serious and shocking.

According to reports, 70 per cent of the electricity distribution system in Visakhapatnam was disrupted, while damages to public sector companies like Vizag Steel and Hindustan Petroleum were pegged at millions of rupees. The government claims to have restored electricity and other infrastructure in record time, but the point is had they been built, in the first place, with natural hazards in mind, much damage could have been avoided.

In the coastal villages, most thatched houses and semi-permanent dwellings were damaged. Interestingly, the traditional conical palmyra-thatched huts characteristic of the area proved to be more resilient to the winds than the other architectural constructions, despite being adjacent to the sea. Yet, ultimately, the ones most affected were the poorest who dwelled in thatched huts.

Cyclone Hudhud left the once extravagantly verdant landscape of Visakhapatnam bare and bereft of green. The barks of trees were stripped away, and whole plantations of cashew trees turned a ghostly brown. A month after the cyclone, though, some of the greenery is returning.

The extent of damage caused by Cyclone Hudhud to the fishing boats of the area was not really significant. The fisheries economy seems to have survived relatively unscathed: scarred, obviously, but not crippled. In several villages where damages were reported to be high, the fishers re-started fishing operations within weeks of the cyclone, notwithstanding the fact that the money promised for

compensation—in the form of cash transfers into their bank accounts—was yet to be paid. The losses to the small-scale fish trade, mostly run by women, were significant but small. Most women were back in business soon after the fishing operations re-started.

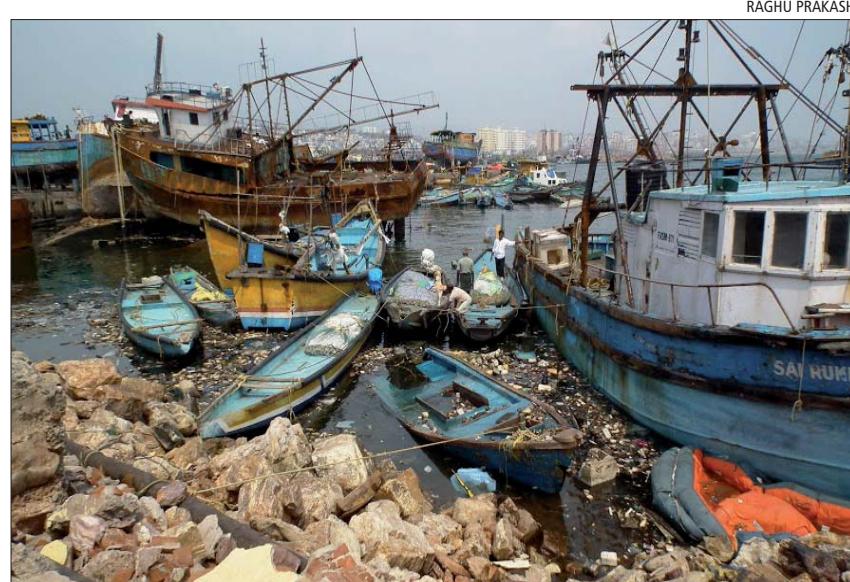
Though the fisheries-related losses were low, the other losses were more significant. For instance, the destruction of cashew-nut plantations, which the fishers leased on an annual basis for a reasonable secondary source of income, robbed them of a rich source of livelihood.

The damages to fishing households were more severe. Dozens of families with young children were forced to shift to neighbouring houses. Many households lost cooking utensils, furniture and television sets, making day-to-day existence difficult. The supply of drinking water and electricity was affected—and has yet to be restored to pre-Hudhud levels.

Although the government and civil society organizations supplied rice, clothes and other essentials for a few weeks, their assistance was reportedly meagre and sporadic.

Yet, the cyclone-affected people managed remarkably well, mostly through a communal sharing of resources.

Cyclone Hudhud also revealed the shortcomings of the government's



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disaster-response strategies. The interest in saving lives during the cyclone was not always matched by a similar zeal to ensure that those who were rescued had access to the basic necessities to survive. While Visakhapatnam city received great attention, the rural areas were neglected.

There were also complaints about the tardiness in payment of compensation money. Added to this

preliminary step in enhancing access to future assistance.

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lacuna was the lack of clarity and transparency in decision-making process, which often led to conflicts.

To be sure, there are lessons to be learned from Cyclone Hudhud. There is a clear need to develop green belts along the beachfront to mitigate the effects of future cyclones.

It is also necessary to re-think the role of urban planning in coastal cities like Visakhapatnam. Should not the possibility of a cyclone be factored into the use of land and design of buildings in a sea-facing urban environment? The rural-urban divide needs to be addressed as well. As one observer remarked, had Hudhud struck the coast 30 km to either side of Visakhapatnam, there would not have been such an immense outpouring of sympathy and support.

The gulf that separates the urban and the rural is reflected in the levels of attention and support accorded to different areas. Even as intense efforts were being made to restore petrol pumps in Visakhapatnam, the women in neighbouring fishing villages could hardly access water for drinking, cooking, washing and bathing.

In the case of fishing communities, the confusion in determining the numbers of boats affected owes as much to a lack of registration as to cyclone-inflicted damage. Efforts to register all boats in the small-scale fisheries sector will be a very important

For more

www.thehindu.com/news/cyclone-hudhud-live-updates/article6493368.ece

Cyclone Hudhud Makes Landfall:

As it Happened

www.hudhud.ap.gov.in/HDRMS/UserInterface/Loginform.aspx

Hudhud Damage Assessment and Relief Monitoring System