







## *Damayanti Jena's Struggle for Safety, and Dignity for the People of Baliapata, Odisha*

The very severe Cyclonic Storm Phailin, which struck the eastern coast of India in October 2013, is one of the strongest cyclones to hit the country in recent history. The State government stated that over 12 million people may have been affected by the cyclone. However, due to the timely and well-coordinated efforts the impact of cyclone Phailin was significantly reduced. The cyclone prompted India's biggest evacuation in 23 years relocating more than 5,50,000 people from the coastlines of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh to safer locations. Despite these measures, the cyclone caused significant damage, including the destruction of houses<sup>1</sup> and critical infrastructure, leading to the loss of livelihood options for many.

In Baliapata village, situated in Ganjam district, cyclone Phailin destroyed essential infrastructure. The toilets and water systems were broken, trees were uprooted, and entire area was flooded. The Gangua canal, one of the city's major drains, overflowed. As a result, contaminated drainage water inundated houses and public spaces, sparing nothing—utensils, clothes, food, and household goods were all submerged. Residents were compelled to leave their belongings and take shelter in neighbouring schools and rescue centres set up by the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation.

Damayanti Jena, a resident of Baliapata for more than a decade, was traumatised looking at the scale of suffering in her area. She migrated to Baliapata, in Odisha's Kendrapara district in pursuit of better livelihood opportunities, along with her husband and two children. Since she couldn't continue her education beyond Class 10, she was determined

to provide both her children with the best possible opportunities. However, after moving to Baliapata, Damayanti and her family had to face a multitude of challenges.

Having migrated to this area for a better opportunity, Baliapata turned out to be a disaster-disease prone area impacting health and livelihood of not only her family but for thousands of people living in this settlement. The area lacked basic amenities like sanitation and electricity, and overall slum management was inadequate. The slum is situated on the banks of the Gangua Canal, which channels all the wastewater originating from the elevated regions of the city. Unfortunately, over time, the canal

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1. Government of Odisha, The Asian Development Bank, and The World Bank, “INDIA Cyclone Phailin in Odisha: Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment Report” (2013), <https://ncrmp.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Odisha-Phailin-report-Final.pdf>.



has become obstructed due to the accumulation of construction debris and waste discarded into it. Consequently, during floods or heavy rainfall, the smooth flow of wastewater is disrupted. Initially, for the well-being of her own family, Damayanti became actively involved in interacting with the people in the slum to identify their concerns, hoping to help and support from government agencies or civil society once the issues were identified. However, as she started engaging with the community, she gained a deeper understanding of their hardships and the dire living conditions people were facing, due to waterlogging and drainage overflow in the area.

Taking matters into her own hands, Damayanti began ensuring the timely collection of waste by monitoring the process and the people involved, in order to prevent excessive waste accumulation around the canal. As people started witnessing Damayanti's efforts and her involvement in managing the waste accumulation issue, they started approaching her for assistance with other concerns, such as contaminated water supply and electricity connections. Damayanti assumed the responsibility of addressing significant issues affecting the people of Baliapata slum. What initially began as an effort to improve the well-being of her own family gradually transformed into a broader community welfare approach. In response to her continued efforts, she was chosen as the President of the Slum Development Association, in a very short span of time.

After cyclone Phailin, Baliapata slum area was severely flooded, with water reaching until the waist. The waterlogging in the canal caused a pervasive stench, and all household items, bedding, and utensils were destroyed. The stagnant water became a breeding ground for mosquitoes and vermin. The hutments in the low-lying Gangua canal banks were washed away, leaving the Kela-migrant families, who belonged to an ethnic Telugu speaking nomadic community (working in traditional professions such as sapera and madaari), with no place to go. Many of the slum residents sought shelter under makeshift shades, but the cyclone winds blew them away. Women, children, and the elderly were huddled in a corner, drenched and shivering in the cold.

In response to the dire situation, Damayanti assembled a group of young men and initiated a rescue mission

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evacuating the migrants. They worked swiftly and systematically to evacuate the Kela-migrants. Damayanti and her team reassured them of their safety and urged them to remain calm. The rescue operations prioritised the evacuation of children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, followed by women and men who navigated the flooded area using ropes. Despite the heavy downpour and the strong winds, Damayanti and her team persevered for over ten hours until everyone was safely relocated to the centre of the settlement. Their determination and unwavering commitment were evident throughout the rescue operation.

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Everyone was safely brought to the shelter house in Gada Gopinath Prasad (GGP) School with the support of the civil defence volunteers. Meanwhile, Damayanti took initiative to meet with the emergency Nodal officer. With the officer’s support, she obtained rations to prepare food for the affected individuals. Additionally, she made efforts so that the migrants receive government assistance for food and rehabilitation, just like others in the settlement. Damayanti and her rescue team took charge of cooking the food and personally ensured that everyone had a meal. The supportive community members in GGP School also contributed by collecting clothes, which were then distributed to those in need. Moreover,

individuals who were injured or had developed a fever were assisted in accessing the medical centre for necessary first aid and medication. Damayanti’s efforts extended beyond immediate rescue and addressed the immediate needs and well-being of the affected individuals.

Following the aftermath of the Phailin cyclone, Damayanti worked in coordination with the ward emergency officials to ensure that dry groceries, rations, and financial relief were provided for all the Kela migrants upon their return to Baliapata. The community’s youth also assisted in rebuilding their hutments.

In 2018, as part of her efforts in slum development, Damayanti joined the Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) as a member of the Single Window Forum. She focused on improving access to water, and sanitation services in her ward. Additionally, she acquired digital skills and learned to use a mobile-based radio, Janhit Vaani to gather community feedback on WASH concerns and present them to officials.

Damayanti’s initial courage in seeking better livelihood opportunities for her family acted as a catalyst, motivating her to embark on an uncharted path. Throughout her journey, she catered to the needs of the entire community, with a particular emphasis on the marginalised and vulnerable individuals. Her unwavering commitment, empathy, and determination paved the way for transformative change, fostering a stronger, and inclusive community.

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## INSIGHTS

- *The Importance of Empathy and Advocacy for Marginalised Groups: Damayanti’s journey demonstrates the power of listening, understanding, and using one’s voice to advocate for those who are often overlooked or disadvantaged. Damayanti’s attempts in rebuilding hutments of Kela community, fosters inclusivity, addresses systemic inequalities, and highlights the importance of working towards creating a more equitable society.*
- *Personal Hardships Can Transform into Community Advocacy: Damayanti’s initial ambition to provide better opportunities for her own family gradually evolved into a larger mission of community welfare. This story emphasises on the transformative power of channelling personal ambition towards collective progress. Despite facing numerous challenges, commitment to providing a better future for her family drove Damayanti to act and extend her efforts to the well-being of the entire community.*