

**Covid-19 and Cyclone Amphan: Understanding Overlapping Disruption, Destitution, and Social Justice in West Bengal, India****Ritabrata Chakraborty**

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**Abstract:** While the world geared up to confront the Covid-19 crisis after March 2020, the state of West Bengal in India faced the parallel blow of a super cyclonic storm called Amphan two months later in May. As a result, a pre-existing crisis viz. the Covid-19 pandemic, which had assumed the form of an extended presence, now interacted with a cyclonic storm to create a new, layered form of disruption that threatened lives and livelihoods and demanded a state response to combat these twin challenges. Taking this 'novel' juncture into account, this paper seeks to explore how justice can be conceived during such disruption(s) and to put the underlying focus on the principles and values at play. An integrative approach is adopted in two aspects: by viewing the two crises as a unified problem; and by invoking the importance of the contestations regarding what is right or just during crises. Recognising the gravity and unavoidability of the climate crisis and West Bengal's present realities, this paper argues that long-term resilience and the principles animating it need to be explored through a broad-based approach that considers state responsibility, legitimacy, and environmental concerns, among others.

**Keywords:**

1. Crisis
2. Justice
3. West Bengal
4. Amphan

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**1. Introduction**

An unfolding climate emergency, the proliferation of newer health risks, and economic headwinds in the form of inflationary pressures and sluggish growth rates have magnified the 'global risk society' that had accompanied the socio-political transformations in a globalising first decade of the 21st century (Beck, 2012). The Covid-19 pandemic marked not just a radical rupture with the past but also has had ramifications in all conceivable spheres of human life. With millions of deaths, debilitated health infrastructure and an economic downturn that still looms large via recessionary fears and soaring inflation, it pushed the world into a cul de sac from where recovery is slow and arduous. In the subnational state of West Bengal in India, the challenges of the pandemic were complicated by super cyclone Amphan that struck the state in May 2020. A fragile ecological situation in the southern part proximate to the coast, strained fiscal resources, and an already stretched administrative machinery burdened with Covid-19 entailed a novel and profound crisis. Lives were lost, agricultural crop fields were inundated,

and the pre-existing health and livelihood plight of the people was magnified by damaged assets and an increase in confirmed coronavirus cases. Both disruptions, especially the pandemic, were without precedent and their interaction merits careful analysis.

Section 2 provides a description of the crisis as it unfolded in order to enable the reader to know the context, consequences and depth of the crisis. The steps taken to tackle it, by various parties involved, are also mentioned. Section 3 makes a detour from the practical sequence of events to explore the theoretical realm of crisis response, social policy, and the principles and priorities relevant to this study. Section 4 discusses the policies that might be adopted or altered to better deal with a similar disruption, keeping in mind and reflecting upon the policies adopted. Section 5 suggests long-term mechanisms that can respond to the enduring problems of climate change, overwhelmed health resources, and the gendered impact of crises, among others. Section 6 concludes by emphasising that a holistic approach across sectors of governance is needed to better prepare for future disruptions, with equal priority on short-term policy and long-term resilience.

## 2. Covid-19 and Amphan: A Description of the Multidimensional Damage

The Amphan cyclone, intensifying from a category 1 to a category 5 super cyclone in less than 36 hours, struck the West Bengal coast on May 20, 2020.<sup>1</sup> Not unexpectedly, it constituted the largest source of displacement in 2020 across India and Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> It accounted for 2.4 million displacements out of which around 800,000 were pre-emptively evacuated by the government. In terms of cost, Amphan, with reported economic losses in India of approximately US\$14 billion, became the costliest tropical cyclone on record for the North Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup> The damage was somewhat limited by large-scale evacuations of the coastal belts in India and Bangladesh, significantly lowering the number of casualties as compared to those from previous such cyclones. A total of 129 lives were lost across both nations (World Meteorological Organization, 2021, p. 28) Occurring as it did during the Covid-19 crisis, evacuation plans and activities were jeopardised due to social distancing norms. Thankfully, social media was put to good use in disseminating pre-cyclone warnings and circulating information on post-cyclone help.

The loss of lives was just one part of the colossal damage. Vast swathes of crops including sesame, rice and mangos were damaged, and fertile soil areas were washed away or contaminated by saline seawater.<sup>4</sup> Confirming the fears of many, the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases climbed as safety norms were undermined amidst the dominant urgency of surviving the cyclone and administrative preoccupation with the same. This is illustrated by the caseload trajectory itself – prior to the arrival of Amphan, 19 districts out of 23 had reported Covid-19 cases and the state registered 2,825 Covid-19 cases and 172 deaths as the cumulative total. This increased to a cumulative total of 3,667 cases and 200 deaths on May 24, in the wake of the cyclone. Subsequently, the total confirmed caseload rose by over 2,100 within 10 days of the Amphan reaching West Bengal.<sup>5</sup> These figures, while capturing the broad direction of the

<sup>1</sup> Joydeep Thakur (2022, 3 March). “Cyclone Amphan was largest source of displacement in 2020, says latest IPPC report”. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/cyclone-amphan-was-largest-source-of-displacement-in-2020-says-latest-ippc-report-101646315766914.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Hawker, Dann Mitchell & Natalie Lord (2022, 12 May). “Climate change isn’t just making cyclones worse, it’s making the floods they cause worse too”. Phys.Org. Republished from The Conversation. <https://phys.org/news/2022-05-climate-isnt-cyclones-worse.html>

<sup>5</sup> Barkha Mathur (2020, 27 July). “Hit By A Pandemic And A Super Cyclone, Here’s How West Bengal Is Tackling The Twin Challenge Of COVID-19 And Amphan”. NDTV; Banega Swasth India. <https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/hit-by-a-pandemic-and-a-super-cyclone-here-is-how-west-bengal-is-tackling-the-twin-challenge-of-covid-and-amphan-47475/>

rise in cases, nonetheless fail to fully depict the magnitude of the spread of the disease in this time period since daily testing was affected by the disruption caused by the cyclone.

Numerous arms and agencies of the administration were activated to the full in order to carry out relief work. National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) teams swung into action for rescue and evacuation.<sup>6</sup> With electric supply being a primary casualty, the West Bengal State Electricity Distribution Company Limited scrambled to restore power in the affected areas of Kolkata and North and South 24 Parganas districts. The authorities often had no option other than herding people out of villages to the cyclone shelters where adherence to safety measures like social distancing was not possible. The situation was somewhat salvaged by sanitising the shelters, separating the rescued into smaller groups and mandating them to wear masks.<sup>7</sup> The sequential priority was clearly on taking the vulnerable to safety and then focusing on Covid compliance. For the thousands of migrants who regularly circulate to different parts of the country in search of jobs in the informal, urban sector, it was a twofold blow as they could neither travel out of their locales in search of work nor access sources of income in their native vicinity marked by wreckage and loss caused by the pandemic and cyclone.

The damage was not limited to humans and their supportive physical infrastructure. The coastal cover of mangroves has always acted as a cushion to lessen the ferocity and impact of incoming storms. Along with tidal marshes and seagrass meadows, the mangroves constitute a coastal ecosystem that sequesters and stores higher amounts of carbon than terrestrial forests.<sup>8</sup> An invaluable barrier against cyclone damage as well as accelerating climate change, the mangroves in Sunderbans on the southern coast of the state suffered physical loss as well as inundation for up to ten days after the passage of Amphan.

### **3. Crisis Mitigation and Social Justice**

An analysis of the twin crises that struck West Bengal, straining the state's administrative machinery and unleashing unforeseen suffering in a variety of spheres, inevitably focuses on the policy responses that should be undertaken to better face such crises in the future. The financial feasibility and situational expedencies, like recognition of urgent demands of various sections of the affected population, are often significant pressures that shape policy responses. However, taking a step back from the operative policy prescriptions at the ground level, it would be analytically useful to study the existing literature on the values and concerns that should shape a principled and fair crisis response. To this end, in what follows the author draws on available literature on crisis response across countries and time periods.

A deeper probe into existing social justice literature reveals a preponderant focus on devising principles and mechanisms to establish a fair distribution of entitlements – special representation rights or material resources like unemployment benefits. John Rawls's scheme of liberal egalitarianism through the idea of justice as fairness, the Nozickian theory of libertarianism with its emphasis on the inviolable right to own and exchange property or even the luck egalitarians' focus on offsetting the adverse influence of undeserved/involuntary bad luck on one's life-chances, are all strands that broadly coalesce around framing a level playing field for people to exercise their life choices by nullifying or compensating for, to the extent

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<sup>6</sup> Vijaita Singh (2020, 25 May). "Cyclone Amphan | NDRF relief disbursed to West Bengal, Odisha". The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/cyclone-amphan-ndrf-relief-disbursed-to-west-bengal-odisha/article31672776.ece>

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 6 above.

<sup>8</sup> Mongabay (2022, 28 June). "Recording mangrove damage from cyclones in the Sunderbans." EastMojo. <https://www.eastmojo.com/environment/2022/06/28/recording-mangrove-damage-from-cyclones-in-the-sunderbans/>

possible, the inhibiting effect of unchosen factors including economic background, gender and race (Kymlicka, 2002, pp. 102-165). They are united in their goal of devising principles of a *broad, long-term nature* applicable in the operation of social cooperation informed by distributive justice. On the other end of the spectrum, disaster management as a policy field does enumerate numerous principles, but they are mostly in the nature of administrative operative ground rules/guidelines of mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. What is also required to bridge these two areas of focus is an overarching structure of values and principles to shape specific state policy responses.

In what follows in this section, the focus is on dimensions where policy decisions are not straightforwardly derivable but borne out of contestations and judgements of what is just and receptive to distinct interests and conditions that interact during a crisis.

### 3.1 Role and Weight of Expertise

Governance during a disruption focuses on expediency, expertise, and the need to meet specific targets like lowering the death rate, rehabilitating people, and supplying food and medicine. This often leads to an implicit acceptance on the part of the leaders that a focus on end goals or consequential concerns in the entire process of governance during disruption is the right way forward. This emphasis can sideline the procedural proprieties that are to be upheld. The gravity of the situation tends to distract citizen attention from the process of making and implementing emergency policies, rules and restrictions.

While it might be tempting to think that procedural rules and norms should inevitably be jettisoned when facing an emergency, the question, on closer scrutiny, is much more complex. A government that disregards existing laws and conventions in order to respond to an emergency as quickly as possible might find itself losing the trust of the people. For example, the initial acceptance by the people of West Bengal of the drastic imposition of lockdowns and mask mandates turned into the levelling of allegations of suppression of daily death numbers and inflation of test rates. Similarly, the immediate all-out response after Amphan was marked by high hopes and faith in the administration to manage the rehabilitation process effectively. Soon enough, however, charges of irregularities in the disbursal of relief material mushroomed from different corners of the state.<sup>9</sup> Transparency and scrupulous adherence to the rule book, thus, are non-negotiable during an emergency response. Transparency, as evidenced in the pandemic response of the West Bengal government, also has an effect on the possible opposition the government faces from the public in ensuring compliance with its rules and regulations.

Further, in terms of expertise, its invocation should not obviate the need for scrutiny of public leaders and officials since the possibility of their personal gain in times of a crisis, when the public eye on procedure often slackens, is quite alive. Ideally, the claims of accuracy and necessity of the expert-supported measure(s) also should not completely escape the critical gaze of the people, since it is the common citizenry that forms the basis of evaluating the efficacy of the expert policies. There might well be a gap between the public understanding of the operational technicalities and the thinking of the experts, but that is not a reason for concealment or uncritical implementation but for a clearer explanation.

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<sup>9</sup> Anshuman Phadikar (2020, 3 June). "Political bias finger in Amphan relief." The Telegraph Online. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/cyclone-amphan-in-bengal-political-bias-finger-in-amphan-relief/cid/1778235>

### 3.2 Unique Policy Priorities During Disruption

In terms of cushions to protect people during and after a crisis, there are ideas and policies existent in different countries in varying forms. Generally speaking, these take the forms of unemployment insurance, cash transfers, transfer of free food grains (as was the case in India), or extension of credit and relaxation of its requirements. There are underlying problems which persist with this singular reliance on social security. As Amartya Sen has shown convincingly (Sen, 2000, pp. 19-22), it leads to myriad pitfalls like additional fiscal strain, loss of current output and labour productivity, and lowering of morale amongst the unemployed and destitute, as reliance on cash transfers for daily subsistence while being involuntarily unemployed can be distressing. A scenario containing some or all of these outcomes leads to a form of social exclusion not directly captured by compensatory financial benefits from the state. It is important here to be alert to the possibility of inclusion on unfavourable terms when the dominant concern is to avoid widespread exclusion through whatever means amidst a crisis. Out of work and devoid of income, a labourer may desperately enter the first ad hoc employment opportunity that is available in the near vicinity, which would quite possibly involve exploitative terms. The fact that the agent – a labourer in this case – might be unaware of the unfavourable inclusion or might be willing to be a part of it notwithstanding the inherent injustice should not be a dissuading factor for the state to identify and remedy such context-mediated injustices.

Is there something beyond concrete components like policies and social safety nets that one can utilise to firm up the process of recovery? There is something we can glean from elements of social cohesion, or expressed more precisely, social capital and civic community. The presence of active participation of the citizens in public affairs, a dense network of civic associations and a high degree of tolerance and mutual trust fosters a civic community that, as research shows, can improve the quality of democratic governance (Putnam et al., 1994, p. 38). This causative connection is explained by having recourse to the concept of social capital. As opposed to conventional economic capital that is private in nature and associated with ideals like competition and individuality, social capital comprises mutual reciprocity, trust and interlinkages of social engagement (Coleman, 1988, pp. 97-101). It comes from collective activities and associations and is deepened with the intensification of these primary societal networks. This may indeed strengthen democratic governance and at times of emergency be the basis on which policy responses are reinforced and supplemented. This was observable in both the Covid-19 crisis and cyclone Amphan. Realising the limits to the capacity of the state and underpinned by social solidarity, individual citizens joined fast-proliferating communication networks and organisations that worked on the ground. These banked on the aggregative force of individual contributions that eschew the rules-based model of administrative response, and in some cases can provide much faster help than recourse to the state apparatus. For example, innumerable WhatsApp groups arose during the peak of the second Covid-19 wave to instantaneously share oxygen availability and helped reduce the massive shortage.

### 3.3 Crises as Critical Junctures

Accepting the invaluable dimension added by societal cohesion and networks in bolstering crisis response does not obviate the need for state action. Amidst the unique juncture posed by the twin crises of Covid 19 and climate change, the question inevitably arises of the receptivity and relative priority shown by the public towards policies seeking to tackle these, either in isolation or in conjunction. Bergquist et al., (2022, pp. 5-7) shows that public experience with a crisis should increase the public's willingness to accept aggressive policy interventions, and more

intriguingly, complementarity and congruence between policies for Covid 19 and climate change increase public support. Integrated policy packages, and in some cases, Covid packages which have climate adaptation components like infrastructural funding, have discernible public approval (ibid.). Though this finding is limited to Canadians and Americans, and one might argue that climate consciousness and existing climate policy are more pronounced in these countries than in India, it at least serves as an indication of the potential benefits of addressing issues such as Covid 19 and climate change together. Conversely, for the government, a crisis with the attendant traits of uncertainty and urgency presents a critical juncture that can call into question existing policies. The wide fiscal deficits needed to finance considerable stimulus packages, going up to 10% of GDP, have been dubbed emergency Keynesianism (Béland et al., 2021, p. 251), yet crises, including the pandemic, are often held as ideal opportunities for the governments to introduce drastic liberalising measures, (e.g. the Indian central government silently allowed higher scope to weapons manufacturers to invest in India, by increasing the Foreign Direct Investment ceiling in defence production to 74 per cent)<sup>10</sup> with a confused public and the pervasive mood of emergency. There might admittedly be a contradiction operating here - between generous stimulus packages that include cash transfers or expand existing welfare packages, and liberalising measures embodying a reduction in state involvement in the economy - but it's to be noted that the large fiscal stimuli have been effected through greater allocations to existing programmes and the extension of welfare benefits. In India, at the national level, this was visible in the components of 'Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana', a relief package providing, among other things, 800 million poor people 5 kg wheat or rice and 1 kg of preferred pulses for free monthly for the period April-June 2020 and increasing the MGNREGA wage to Rs202 a day from Rs182.<sup>11</sup> A simultaneous development was the blanket relaxation of the labour laws in several states like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh with the purported aim of increasing economic and industrial productivity.<sup>12</sup> The apparent contradiction can thus be explained by the fact that the fiscal generosity was mainly funnelled towards the extension and expansion of welfare schemes whereas the parallel, and more discrete, change was the deepening of neoliberal policies under the alibi of offsetting the economic downturn.

### 3.4 State, Markets and Climate Ethos

Do all of the above realities lead us to a repudiation of market principles and structures in crisis response, embracing a wholly state-centric response instead? Not quite, and as shall be argued briefly below, a holistic approach is practical in the case of climate adaptation and crisis response, for reasons that are similar. Even in the supposedly ideal governance situation where strict laws and regulations are enacted, the volitional and uncoerced participation of private corporations, individuals and other non-state actors is a link without which both processes of climate adaptation and crisis response would collapse. Thus, there's a limit to which environmental governance can be effected through legislative enactments and executive fiat. Personal consumption decisions, lifestyle patterns, and the production and pollution control

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<sup>10</sup> Ila Patnaik & Shubho Roy (2020, July 31). "Why India has increased economic freedoms in response to Covid, unlike Europe & US." The Print <https://theprint.in/ilanomics/why-india-has-increased-economic-freedoms-in-response-to-covid-unlike-europe-us/471646/>

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Finance, Government of India, Press Release (2020, 26 March). <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1608345>. MGNREGA is the 2005 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act..

<sup>12</sup> Aanchal Magazine (2020, 8 May). "COVID-19 Effect: Relaxation in labour laws, exemptions to cos in various states draw trade union ire." The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/covid-19-effect-relaxation-in-labour-laws-exemptions-to-firms-in-various-states-draw-trade-union-ire-6399183/>

mechanisms of corporations will always be important to environmental outcomes. For crisis mitigation, the participation of voluntary organisations, NGOs, and community groups is often secured by the internal impulse of these organisations to spring into action to provide relief to fellow citizens independently of calls by the government for their support. However, here as well the willingness to act remains of supreme importance in determining the range of agencies and organisations involved and the nature of the action performed by each of them. Above all, this cannot be taken for granted, since each of these agents has a different mix of manpower and funding, and different organisational mandates in respect of involvement in emergencies. Over the medium and long term, the government may evolve a recognition-reward system to encourage more organisations and individuals to step in during dire times.

### **3.5 Citizen Entitlement and Crisis**

The conventional idea of desert-based justice holds that one deserves a good/entitlement based on some grounds – ‘desert bases’ – which allows one to claim deservingness (Olsaretti, 2006, p. 438). The bases may variously be IQ, quality of performance and/or amount and nature of effort expended. However, in seeking to invoke justice amidst extreme disruption, the base is externally determined – e.g., pandemic-induced loss of employment, as well as determined by an intrinsic trait or identity – e.g., greater lay-offs faced by women (gender being the concerned identity here) after the pandemic set in.

The set of different identities, when mixed with hierarchical access to opportunities and related discrimination, weakens the otherwise strong plea for impartiality in social justice. Impartiality in justice rests on what Brian Barry calls ‘a fundamental commitment to the equality of all human beings’ (Mendus, 2006, p. 423), but in the face of markedly differential vulnerability, access and distress, resulting from socially embedded hierarchies, social justice has to take an avowedly target-based, preferential approach. Furthermore, a just social policy entails a focus on both redistribution and recognition. This requires, besides the specifics of tangible transfers like aid and loans, symbolic yet substantive measures such as lending to vulnerable sections a greater voice in decision-making structures and remedying the power differentials endemic to inter-community relations in any modern state.

## **4. Possibilities of Practical Policy**

Before venturing into how considerations of social justice, and lessons gleaned from actual cases, can be used to guide long-term reconstruction and resilience-building, it would be instructive to explore some policy suggestions that might be employed should such an acute crisis strike again.

### **4.1 Need for Devolution in Decision-Making**

Operating under a democratic framework grounded in the Indian constitution, it is the legislative background that needs to be analysed at the outset. The swift declaration of lockdowns in March 2020 in India was predicated on the 2005 Disaster Management Act (DMA) and the colonial-era 1897 Epidemic Diseases Act, while social distancing guidelines were issued by the National Disaster Management Authority.<sup>13</sup> In this phase, constituent states had little room for deviation or local improvisation in drawing up the specifics of the lockdown measures.

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<sup>13</sup> Vakasha Sachdev (2020, 26 March). “How the Coronavirus Lockdown Was Imposed & Why This is Important” TheQuint . <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/india-coronavirus-faqs-which-law-used-to-impose-21-day-lockdown-centre-or-state-govt#read-more>



The operative change needed is a rapid devolution of not just funds but also decision-making autonomy in such dire situations. Though the novel and profound nature of the Covid-19 pandemic impelled a centrally guided policy response across states and districts, its interaction with natural disasters like cyclones calls for conferring state-level flexibility in all relevant areas of rule-making, including lockdown, testing and related medical vigil.

#### **4.2 Diversification of Channels of Communication**

Conventionally, radio, newspapers and television have been the usual channels of disseminating early warnings and instructions for evacuation. These were used even more intensely to spread Covid-related awareness and guidelines. Such information transmission can be effectively supplemented by social media, due to their speed, low cost, expansive reach and the possibility of individual-level penetration through accounts and usage existing for each single person. Research shows that, though Amphan naturally led to the disruption of internet services, a significant number of people continued to receive crucial information via the internet (Poddar et al., 2022, pp. 9-12). Additionally, and crucially, social media and the internet more generally enable two-way communication between the affected and the authorities which is not possible in the traditional avenues mentioned above. Operative improvements that need to be ensured are enhancing the coverage of internet services, increasing the speed, especially in far-flung areas, and monitoring and counteracting misinformation. Policies can also be devised to conduct periodic digital literacy drives and create a specific Disaster-Relief app as a unified platform that enables two-way communication between the relief authorities and the people in all areas including preparedness, shelter and response.

#### **4.3 Unity and Synergy in Relief Efforts**

Coping with grave and overlapping crises requires a unified response that transcends political cleavages that imperil coordinated relief efforts. This is all the more necessary in an overtly politicised state like West Bengal, where fault lines based on party affiliation/support often have more salience than other variables like caste or region. Besides enabling much-needed cross-party unity, this would also generate synergy in mobilising resources and cadres in mitigation efforts. However, the non-negotiable need remains for transparency and accountability by the various parties in all stages of governmental relief measures, which should not be diluted by the broader and pressing need for a united outlook.

#### **4.4 Imperative to Transcend Political Cleavages**

The imperative to jettison political rigidity is essential in another crucial sphere. It is undisputed that the Indian Army has the expertise and resources to quickly undertake necessary steps like evacuation, clearance of crucial roadways, with a speed and efficacy better than civilian government's relief forces like municipalities and police. However, given the acrimonious relationship between the Central government (ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP) and the incumbent state government of West Bengal (ruled by the Trinamool Congress or TMC), there was a palpable delay by the latter in calling the armed forces for help, especially to clear up the roads of Kolkata, the state's capital city.<sup>14</sup> Irrespective of the reason behind it – overt faith in the municipal body's resources or political arrogance – the fact remains that the decision betrayed a disregard for effectiveness and thorough coordination in the face of a grave crisis.

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<sup>14</sup> Harshit Sabarwal (2020, May 24). "Cyclone Amphan: Bengal governor slams CM Mamata Banerjee for delay in seeking Army's help for relief work." Hindustan Times (Kolkata). <https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/cyclone-amphan-bengal-governor-slams-cm-mamata-banerjee-for-delay-in-seeking-army-s-help-for-relief-work/story-KJcPjk4z7XPaSxCQERatAM.html>



#### 4.5 Generation of Livelihood Avenues Amidst Crises

The intersection of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Amphan cyclone presented an unfortunate scenario for the hundreds of migrants who had trudged home to the Sundarbans – the coastal delta of West Bengal – once the lockdown came into force. In response to the devastation inflicted by the storm, with agricultural fields inundated with salt water and fisheries destroyed, the natural reaction would have been to migrate elsewhere again in search of work. However, with movement in the vicinity of their hometowns severely curbed, and trains and buses to Kolkata and beyond stopped, there was a severe crisis of employment and livelihood (Gupta et al., 2021, pp. 11-17). The Government's task in such a situation was to increase public awareness about the role of lockdowns amidst the background of an unforeseen health emergency and create some possibilities to alleviate the dangerous economic scenario and the deep sense of despair due to this mobility and livelihood trap. Multiple policy options may be explored and assessed but here are considered those that have been advocated in the wake of previous calamities:

##### 4.5.1 Unconditional Cash Transfers

In view of the sharp economic downturn after the onset of the pandemic in India, several economists and also the Indian National Congress (INC), the principal opposition party at the national level, made a push for cash transfers to provide a minimal survival base to households deprived of income.<sup>15</sup> This need was strengthened by the fact that about 90% of the Indian workforce is engaged in the informal sector without a substantial cushion in times of work cessation.<sup>16</sup> The case for Bengal was rendered graver owing to certain special factors: the high number of migrant workers who work outside the state and had returned and were without much income; the destruction of agricultural resources like paddy fields which crippled the bulk of farmers; the twin impacts of lockdown and infrastructural damage to industries and mills, among others. The coastal belt, especially the Sunderbans, is afflicted by additional chronic problems like a high malnutrition prevalence among women and children. Cash transfers would at least help in preventing further worsening of malnutrition and poverty by enabling procurement of essential food items and medicines, and also by easing the process of damage repair.

However, the provision of cash transfers is not without pitfalls. Direct bank transfers to the beneficiaries' account are a useful distribution mechanism, but the central issue is, whether in a lockdown or a natural disaster it is feasible for people to go and withdraw the funds in areas already marked by low bank penetration? The actual distribution of relief funds in the recent West Bengal crises was also marked by instances of political bias towards supporters and/or cadre of the ruling party, which shows that cash transfers can be a risky proposition unless it can be ensured that the affected people, irrespective of political inclinations or proximity to the incumbent party's cadre, get their much-needed share of support.<sup>17</sup> At a macro level, the tight fiscal situation of the state, with one of the highest debt burdens in the country, gives little room for universal coverage or a substantial transfer amount.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The Economic Times (2021, 27 May). "Experts suggest fiscal measures to boost demand amid pandemic." <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/experts-suggest-fiscal-measures-to-boost-demand-amid-pandemic/articleshow/83016290.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>16</sup> See the Economic Survey of Government of India.

[https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/economicsurvey/ebook\\_es2022/files/basic-html/page398.html](https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/economicsurvey/ebook_es2022/files/basic-html/page398.html)

<sup>17</sup> See footnote 10 above.

<sup>18</sup> The Chief Minister of West Bengal was compelled to direct government departments to reduce unnecessary expenditure. See Business Standard (2022, 6 Feb). "As Bengal's debt piles up, state govt applies brakes on spending."

#### 4.5.2 Inclusion of the Affected in Reconstruction

On the one hand, the Amphan super cyclone destroyed homes and public infrastructures such as roads, river embankments and electricity poles. On the other hand, the cyclone, along with the lockdown, caused a severe crisis of livelihood for the distressed populace and exerted extreme pressure on the financial and administrative capacity of the state. This meant that finding the funds to repair the cyclone damage was a tall order for both the afflicted masses and the government. In this regard, it will be prudent to draw these people into the task of restoration of essential services and infrastructure, besides state-funded and managed reconstruction of their properties and fields and/or fisheries. This would serve as a doubly-beneficial policy tool – saving crucial scarce resources of the state, given the fact that the state's spending capacity is already constrained during a crisis, and providing some income to the people in return for mitigation of damage to their own habitat and environment.

#### 4.5.3 Broadening the Base of Relief Response

The government's leading role in responding to crises should not sideline an assessment of the possible role of non-government agencies. In fact, I would argue that an approach involving both the various arms of government as well as non-government agencies is vital and preferable to direct ameliorative efforts solely by the government. To be fair, the West Bengal scenario did see the parallel participation of a variety of contributing parties – from district collectors and the SDRF to the Indian Coast Guard – within the broader umbrella of the state. However, going beyond that, several NGOs, civil society organisations, volunteer groups and individuals of their own volition assisted with fundraising and the transportation of relief material to the hard-hit areas. The Red Volunteers – a state-wide constellation of hundreds of local teams of Left activists - played a stellar role, arranging food and medicine during the first wave of Covid in 2020 (when Amphan struck), and distributing primarily oxygen and beds when the much more devastating second wave ravaged the state in 2021. Unfortunately, the state government was unenthusiastic about extending support and working in tandem with extra-governmental bodies and the Red Volunteers, which had to provide funds and personnel on their own.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4.6 Constant Engagement with Experts

In an important respect the Bengal government struck the right note from the outset by drawing insights and suggestions from experts to deal with the multifaceted damage generated by the pandemic. A 'Global Advisory Board' was formed in April 2020 headed by Nobel Laureate Abhijeet Banerjee to advise on health infrastructure issues and economic recovery.<sup>20</sup> Out of numerous meetings held to discuss the evolving state of the pandemic, the Board suggested vital measures like paying special attention to identifying the groups whose economic situation was most adversely affected by the lockdown and providing them with state support. This assumes importance in the context of the fact that West Bengal has had a high outflow of migrant workers who, forced to return to their home state by the pandemic, found themselves trapped without work opportunities as a consequence of Covid restrictions and the aftermath of the cyclone. The Global Advisory Board also requested the state government to conduct

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[https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/as-bengal-s-debt-piles-up-state-govt-applies-brakes-on-spending-122020600112\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/as-bengal-s-debt-piles-up-state-govt-applies-brakes-on-spending-122020600112_1.html)

<sup>19</sup> To learn more about the contribution of the Red Volunteers, and the political dynamics involved, see Sandip Chakraborty (2021, 3 June). "WB: Red Volunteers get Overwhelming Support from Civil Society, Not State Govt. " NewsClick. <https://www.newsclick.in/WB-Red-Volunteers-Overwhelming-Support-Civil-Society-State-Govt>

<sup>20</sup> Hindustan Times (2021, 5 August) "Bengal's advisory board, led by Abhijit Banerjee, to discuss impending 3rd wave." <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/kolkata-news/covid-advisory-board-led-by-nobel-laureate-abhijit-banerjee-to-meet-today-101628138571884.html>

aggressive drives for more vaccination and to encourage people to comply with the mask mandate.<sup>21</sup> To make it effective, policy additions may embrace the formation of district-level expert bodies, continuous monitoring of the evolving situation on ground, and dissemination and internalisation of the norms/rules of a crisis situation in the marginalised folk who often face difficulties due to low levels of education and unfamiliarity with government procedures.

## **5. Long-Term Resilience and Animating Principles**

This section goes beyond the immediate and the urgent – though urgent problems undeniably prompt such reflection on long-term changes – to see what can be done to build structures, principles and mechanisms that would be better able to protect people, physical assets, and the environment. In the case of West Bengal, the proximity to the Bay of Bengal, high population density and eroding mangrove cover along the coast heightens the danger. As cyclones become more frequent and stronger over time, it is estimated that storm surge exposure in India will increase by 50-90% in a low-emission scenario and by over 200% in a high-emission scenario (Mitchell et al., 2022, p.10) Thus, both fundamental larger structural transformations and specific statistical predictions underline the need to confront the enduring and expanding crisis.

**5.1** The focus needs to broaden into infrastructure and institution building from relief and rehabilitation. Accepting the recurring onslaught of natural disasters as inevitable, public assets including roads, electric transmission lines, and embankments require a greater degree of physical resilience balanced with a diminishing carbon footprint to surmount the twin challenge of physical resilience and climate change mitigation. This brings into focus the construction industry, urban planners, and above all the constant involvement of the political class to see that the goals of quality assurance, durability to disasters, and environmental sustainability are met. Some steps like shifting overhead electric transmission underground have already been commenced, but rural and coastal areas, which face the immediate impact of incoming cyclones, are yet to witness complete underground electric transmission. Here emerges a governance dilemma between a need to prioritise urban infrastructure improvement, given high and ever-rising population concentration in urban areas, and climate vulnerability-led prioritisation of high-risk areas. Given the acuteness of the climate crisis, lending greater weight to the frontline areas should be of foremost concern, both for the sake of making them safer and also of providing a stronger buffer for the urban areas. For major Indian cities located on the coastline – Mumbai, Chennai, or Vizag – this concern naturally assumes greater importance.

**5.2** Human livelihoods and the supporting infrastructure have been central to our discussion. This, however, should not detract from the background concern of environmental degradation. More vitally, the intrinsic value of natural resources as an indispensable part of our ecosystem – going beyond a purely anthropocentric prism of seeing it as useful only in an instrumental way for the preservation of human life – is yet to be deeply transmitted in the public discourse. (Chakrabarty 2009, pp. 197-207) In the realm of building resilience against possible disruptions, such thinking leads to renewed and distinct attention towards our natural buffers such as lakes, tree covers, mangroves, as well as diverse fauna. A host of factors, including land erosion, hypersalinity and sediment deposition due to storms, have contributed to a steady shrinkage of

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<sup>21</sup> Sreyashi Dey (2020, 16 July) “Advisory Board led by Nobel laureate Abhijeet Banerjee helps West Bengal fight back COVID-19” <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/advisory-board-led-by-nobel-laureate-abhijeet-banerjee-helps-west-bengal-fight-back-covid/622377>

the mangrove cover of the Sundarbans. More precisely, an increase in river salinisation due to climate change can threaten the survival of *Heritiera fomes*, the invaluable timber tree (Sundari) that constitutes the tree cover of the Sundarbans. The interaction of the government and the people with animals, especially tigers, leads to additional complexity. In the run-up to Amphan, areas like Jharkhali saw the deployment of rapid response teams armed with speed boats and tranquiliser guns to prevent tigers from straying into human settlement areas. In terms of thought and practice – of the government and people at large – the co-existence of human settlements, their assets and livelihood mechanisms and the realm of diverse plants and animal species need to be seen as a symbiotic and mutually-enhancing relationship.

**5.3 Infrastructure-resilience building can and must take a two-pronged approach.** In terms of conventional green infrastructure, the greening of urban areas, stormwater management and biodiversity protection are some key elements. On a parallel plane, blue infrastructure implies protecting water bodies like lakes, ponds and canals as well as ensuring the supply of clean water and flood prevention. West Bengal faces an intriguing paradox in this area with good average annual rainfall and plenty of canals and water bodies on the one hand and rapid urbanisation leading to the filling in of lakes and canals and increasing pressure on existing channels of water discharge on the other. The nexus between the entrenched real estate sector and construction syndicates linked to the ruling Trinamool Congress (Jha et al., 2022, pp. 8-12) make prospects worse for undertaking such long-term changes for sustainability beyond immediate political and commercial targets. To make some headway, bottom-up pressure by the local populace and political will and maturity emanating from above should be effective starting points, given the fact that mobilisation within the electorate will exert some pressure on the political representatives to act on the real estate sector

**5.4 Regarding health,** according to the National Health Profile, there is one government doctor per 10,411 patients in West Bengal, higher than the national average but drastically short of the WHO benchmark, while the percentage of the population attending government hospitals is higher than other states. The share of government hospitals in total hospitalisation is 74.1% in rural areas and 58.9% in urban areas, both of which are much higher than the all-India average (Mahmood & Chakraborty, 2022, p. 8). This high degree of dependence on the public health care system puts more than usual responsibility on the government to be responsive and to ensure quality health service delivery to this bulk of the population. While the technical specifics of this can be better elucidated by health policy experts, the present essay focuses on the interaction between the state as a political entity and the health sector at the centre of citizen expectation.

**5.4.1 Responsibility:** In a state with high dependence on government hospitals and limited capacity of the people to access private healthcare facilities, it is incumbent upon the state to provide quality healthcare service delivery that is inexpensive, accessible and expeditious. The motivation for this may be viewed in different, complementary ways by the government: (i) as a responsibility stemming from the democratic nature of the polity; (ii) as a political necessity to guard against the possibility of electoral backlash due to an inefficient health service; or (iii) as an instrument needed to ensure socio-economic development of the state propelled by a workforce that is fit and able. Besides the plausibility of these factors as drivers of a better health regime, at the most basic level a conscientious realisation and admission of the imperative of health care as a basic right of the people needs to be woven into the narrative of state responsibility. Once this gains widespread electoral appeal and achieves political consensus, it

would be an expected element in the political bargain that is continually struck between the citizens and the political class.

Even if this is secured, operative decisions will continue to depend on the ambit of responsibility demarcated by the government at that particular time. For example, the districts in West Bengal with better healthcare facilities would face a conundrum in balancing local pressures and the inflow of patients from adjoining districts in dire need of treatment. Managing these competing pressures in a decisive and amicable manner is possible only with a long-term expansion of health infrastructure with a special eye on plugging regional/local deficits.

**5.4.2 Legitimacy:** One might argue, and rightly so, that state responsibility for healthcare is automatically expected from the incumbent government in a democratic welfare state such as the one existing in West Bengal. Yet, precisely because it is democratic in nature, nothing emanating from the state can be taken without scrutiny or question. The conduct of routine measures like polio vaccination drives is not always met with fulsome participation by the citizens, requiring the use of a certain degree of persuasion and even coercion. From the people's perspective, the relevant question is that of legitimacy – surpassing the usual boundaries of law-and-order maintenance and service delivery – of health interventions that are one-way and personal in nature. This might be a minor concern in normal times, but the emergence of a health crisis confers extraordinarily wide powers on the government, entailing steps like shop closures, lockdowns, mask mandates, and compulsory testing and inoculation that intrude on personal autonomy. Inevitably, in times of disruption, the justificatory ground for legitimacy calls for better elucidation and a clear causal connection between the mandated measures and the mitigation of the crisis.

## **6. Conclusion**

The coincidence of the Covid-19 pandemic and Cyclone Amphan posed a uniquely difficult challenge for governance and state responsibility. It reinforced the position argued in this paper, that a unified approach is vital to grapple with such critical junctures, and that value contestations are inevitable elements of policy-making, requiring new ideas of fairness while shaping policy priorities. In the face of such conundrums, it would be unfair to pin responsibility entirely on the populace. Once noted for genuine land reforms and grassroots political empowerment, West Bengal is now marked by the stagflationary decay of its industrial and service sectors sitting uncomfortably with welfare schemes that have caused modest improvement in the agricultural and rural sectors.

This paper concludes that a reversal of the livelihood crisis, an overhauling of infrastructure capacities and the increasing acceptance of the need for climate adaptability among the people are essential requirements in the absence of which future disruptions would be similarly distressing and wide-ranging. State response, even if mediated by the noble ethos of justice and helped by the unmatched financial capacity of the government as an economic actor, can only achieve so much. The onus lies on the political class and a conscious citizenry, both in West Bengal and other risk-prone areas around the world, to take lessons and focus on both immediate policy imperatives and long-term resilience.

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