

What's in a Name?

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The word Amphan means “sky”, a name given by Thailand in 2004, as is the custom of “Namkaran” of cyclones. But who knew then that one day this “sky” would break down upon us and shatter millions of lives, livelihoods, “home and hearth”.

The next cyclone, I gathered, may be named Nisarga (Bangladesh) or Gati (India)—innocuous almost deceptive titles, that do not reflect the untold sufferings and insecurities they are likely to inflict.

The coastal areas of the country face cyclones every year but 2020 seems to be a year of misery. On 20 May 2020, the Amphan made landfall at 2.30 pm at Bakkhali, West Bengal. By that time the estimated wind speed was 155 km/hour, which was a tamer version of the tempest that had roused its ugly head at 240 km/hour two days ago.¹

The devastation that ensued was unthinkable, surpassing expectations and damaging public property worth over ₹100,000 crores. An average rise of global temperature above 1.5°C above preindustrial times has resulted in extremes of temperatures, droughts, wildfires, cyclones, and heavy rainfall in various parts of the earth and Amphan seems to be one such consequence.

Various districts of West Bengal comprising East Midnapur, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Kolkata, Hooghly, and Howrah as well as Odisha and parts of Bangladesh were worst hit.

The cyclone produced sustained winds of 112 km/hour and gusts to 190 km/hour, which were recorded by the Alipore observatory, Kolkata—damaging homes, overturning vehicles, and uprooting almost 10,000 trees and numerous electric poles.² The Calcutta Municipal Corporation stated that Amphan destroyed over 4,000 electric poles, leaving the city devoid of power for days in some areas. Torrential rain followed the storm and waterlogging paralyzed life in large parts of the city.

In the districts thousands of mud homes collapsed, breached embankments led to the inundation of villages and croplands with saltwater. Across West Bengal, thousands of acres of paddy fields, vegetable, and sesame crops were damaged.

Though the total death toll in West Bengal and Bangladesh was documented to be 129, the livings were dying a million deaths trying to make ends meet. It has proved to be the costliest tropical storm with economic losses amounting to 13.2 billion dollars as estimated by the World Meteorological Organization.³

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Relief activities and funding from government and other sources were struggling to offer help but the calamity was too overwhelming. The West Bengal branch of the Association of Physicians of India (API) had pitched in to contribute and offer some assistance from its part. A team representing the API visited Namkhana in June to distribute new clothes, food, medicines, and tarpaulin sheets to the inhabitants. Simultaneously a month-long program was undertaken, with the help of the local thana in Gangasagar Island, to provide lunch to 1,000 people daily and this was overseen by members personally who visited from Kolkata.

All said and done, I wonder, what's in a name? Be it Amphan, Phani, Tsunami, or Corona: it is high time to reflect upon the deeper messages Nature is trying to give us. The world is reeling under the burden of natural calamities and devastating disease. We humans, who claim to be the most intelligent species on earth, have overstepped our boundaries in our quest for mechanization, industrialization, money, and power. Symbiosis is the essence of life and we need to nurture and preserve, give- in order to take and think, before it is too late...

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