

GRIM STATS

125 deaths

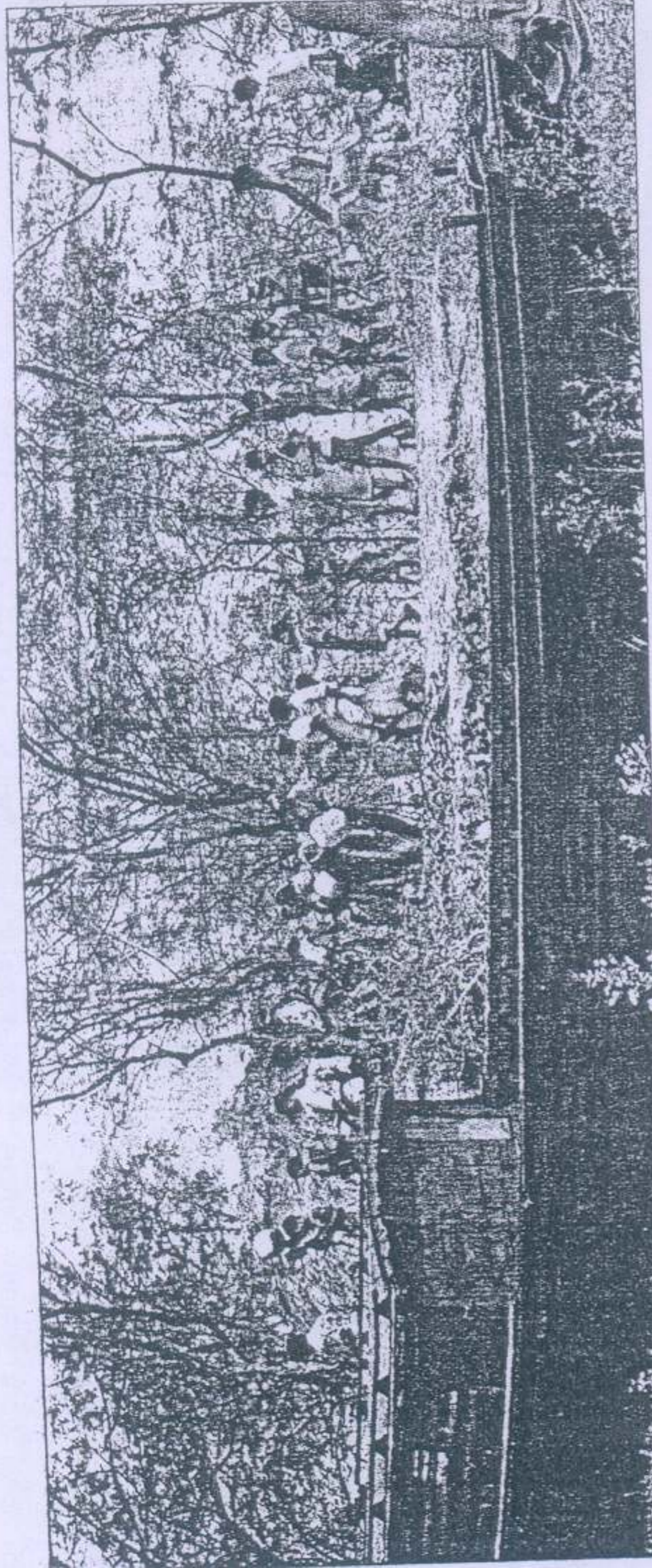
16 districts affected

62 lakh population affected

6 lakh houses damaged

659 relief camps

3.57 population in relief camps



SUBHENDU GHOSH/HT

Survived Aila, but may not survive govt-supplied water

Hindustan Times
Exclusive

Joydeep Thakur
Kolkata, May 31

CALL IT gross oversight or good old bungling by the babu, but the West Bengal fire services department could be sending polluted water to cyclone-hit areas in South 24 Parganas. The state government, in a desperate urge to send relief to more than one lakh affected people, had urged the department to deploy four fire tenders to supply "safe drinking water".

But the department sent vehicles with whatever water was stored in the 16,000 litre tanks, knowing well that they are never washed or disinfected and the water is not fit for human consumption.

Though the director of

department claimed that the tanks were first disinfected, insiders told HT that no such measures were taken. The department is only using Halogen tablets to make the water "safe", they said.

Director of Fire Brigade, Gopal Bhattacharjee, told HT: "It was at Fire Services Minister Pratim Chatterjee's request that we deployed four vehicles. Since Friday our tankers are ferrying drinking water to cyclone-affected areas. Each vehicle has a capacity of 16,000 litres. Everyday the tanks are refilled at Mullickghat and Wellington Square. They come back at night and return with

We have disinfected our tanks and the water is safe... Everyday the tanks are refilled. They come back at night and return the next day

—GOPAL BHATTACHARJEE,
Director, Fire Brigade

fresh supply." Chatterjee belongs to the Forward Bloc, one of the smaller allies of the CPI(M).

Asked if the tankers have been disinfected and the water being supplied is potable, he said: "Yes. We have disinfected our tanks and the water is safe."

But officials in the department who operate the vehicle and oversee fire-fighting operations narrated a different story. A senior officer, speaking to HT on condition of anonymity, said: "The tanks have not been disinfected and the water being supplied is not drinking water by any standards."

The vehicles, he said, had

never been used for ferrying drinking water and were pressed into service only for fire fighting. During such operations, water is collected from the Hooghly, ponds and even hydrants. Though the tanks have a capacity of 16,000 litres and are filled to the brim there is always a leftover of 2,000 litres after fire-fighting, which is never cleaned. If more water is required, the remaining portion — i.e. 14,000 litres — is filled up.

"So there is always some residual water, which becomes toxic over time. This apart, our tanks are never washed. Also, the hose pipes with which the water is supplied are kept on

Tanks have not been disinfected and water being supplied is not potable by any standards... there is always residual water which becomes toxic.

— A SENIOR FIRE BRIGADE OFFICIAL
WHO DOES NOT WISH TO BE NAMED

the road and in chemical godowns when we have to fight fire"

"So even if we fill up the tanks with drinking water it does not mean that the water being supplied is pure. It is totally unfit for human consumption," he added.

Another senior fire brigade officer said: "One of our vehicles are working in Basati area. The tank has not been disinfected. But the water is being treated with Halogen tablets and other disinfectants."

Member Mayor in Council (Water) of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation Mrinal Mondol also threw some light. "The fire brigade frequently takes water from us. Sometimes they take filtered water sometimes unfiltered water. Our Mullick Ghat station, however, supplies unfiltered water which is not fit for drinking".

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NATURE'S FURY: The damage that Alla wreaked has left 1.6 lakh people homeless in Sunderbans

namool Congress-led panchayats in the affected areas for their "inaction."

Both the government and the Opposition, however, continue to ignore the grim prognosis made time and again by experts about the Sunderbans — the largest mangrove forests in the world and the home of millions of people and the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger — becoming extinct in less than 50 years unless permanent measures are adopted to prevent erosion of river embankments.

The 3500 km long embankments in the Sunderbans were built by the then zamindars over 100 years ago. These clay and brick structures, weakened by time and neglect, are simply unable to withstand the ferocity of the rushing sea waters.

Floods occur there regularly, though not as devastating as this time's. Experts suggest replacement of the present 6-8 feet tall dykes with concrete embankments 18-22 feet tall and 100 feet wide at the base, to stop the gushing waters. All human habitation within 200 metres of these embankments must be shifted. These plots of agricultural land and homes have to be replaced by plantations.

True, such huge construction and rehabilitation of a staggeringly large number of people will require massive funds. But that is exactly what is necessary to save the Sunderbans, experts say. Neither the state government, nor the Centre, however, have shown any concern to preempt this disaster.

□ *SUTAPA Bhattacharya, a homemaker who arrived from Singapore on Saturday night with high fever and was packed off to Beliaghata's Infectious Diseases hospital as a suspected swine flu patient, walked out of the hospital on Sunday morning with two hapless nurses not knowing what to do. Dumped in an isolation ward and told that her blood sample could be collected only on Monday, Sutapa said she could no longer withstand the mosquito bites and so was returning to her home in Kalyani!*

Governor visits Aila-affected areas

Victims complain of inadequate relief; Governor promises speedy repair of embankments

Raktima Bose

SANDESKHALI (NORTH 24 PARGANAS): "We have lost everything. I do not know how I will start my life anew when the water recedes. Please help," — a sobbing Minati Ghosh from Netajipally village of West Bengal's North 24 Parganas told Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi who visited some of the areas affected by cyclone Aila on Wednesday.

He keenly listened to her and assured her of all possible help.

Mr. Gandhi's visit came a day after Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee went to the area and met with angry protests from victims complaining of inadequate relief.

The Governor took a boat ride on the Petni river along with officials from the district administration to gauge the extent of the damage.

Residents of villages, who

were busy repairing the breached embankments, lined up on the shore and waved fervently at Mr. Gandhi, pleading for help.

On seeing this, Mr. Gandhi sent for some of them to the vessel in which he was travelling and assured them of speedy repair of the embankments.

At Kathkhali village, he asked the villagers if they were getting regular supply of food, drinking water and medicine.

Hundreds of flood victims gathered around Mr. Gandhi at the Dhamakhali jetty and aired their grievances about the administration's relief distribution process.

Fresh alert

Marcus Dam reports:

The State government on Wednesday issued a fresh alert in the wake of reports of the likely formation of a low pressure area over the Bay of Bengal near the coastal areas

of the State and Bangladesh on Saturday.

"We are giving importance to the restoration of breached embankments," Finance Minister Asim Dasgupta said here.

Mr. Dasgupta had a telephonic conversation with Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram who assured him that a Central team would be sent to the affected areas soon to assess the damage. The Centre would be releasing Rs. 100 crore as advance relief.

The death toll had mounted to 133, Mr. Dasgupta said. The number of those affected had risen to more than 87 lakhs. The State government had increased its allotment for relief and restoration work to Rs. 87 crore, he said.

Meanwhile, Gorkha Janamukti Morcha president Bimal Gurung called on Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and sought Rs. 1,000 crore for relief and restora-

tion work in the Darjeeling hills, where several landslips occurred following heavy rain in the aftermath of the cyclone. He also sought a visit by a Central team to the region to assess the damage. Twenty-eight people were killed in the landslips.

20 medical teams sent

K.V. Prasad reports from New Delhi:

On the request of West Bengal, the Defence Ministry has despatched 20 medical teams to cyclone Aila-affected areas of North and South 24 Parganas districts.

The armed forces have pressed into service four Gemini boats in the affected areas to distribute relief materials. More boats are on standby to be pressed into service at short notice, an official release said.

The State government has sought technical advice from the Army for its reconstruction.



WOES APLENTY: West Bengal Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi listening to cyclone victims at Sandeshkhali village in North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal on Wednesday. — PHOTO: SUSHANTA PATRONOBISH

I Think, Therefore...

After weathering the storm

WHEN *Aila* hit the city last Monday, the authorities were completely unprepared for it. This is because this was the first cyclone to affect the city in 24 years. So trees fell uprooted, electric and telephone wires were torn asunder, and people were caught out in the streets, completely unaware of what to do at the lack of proper emergency services. But even as it limped back to normalcy, there was another place in our vicinity that sank deeper into the after-effects of the cyclone: the Sunderbans. The Sunderban delta is an ecologically vulnerable area. The reason why the effects of the cyclone were not more devastating for the city is the Sunderbans. They acted yet again as a shield. But in the course of it they took a massive beating.

At the time of writing this article, the death toll in the Sunderbans has already crossed 250. But the ordeals of the living are worse. Many of the villages are inaccessible, except on boats. All roads and embankments have been washed away. All modes of communication have been severed. In fact, the situation is so desperate that it is impossible to know how many people are still trapped in marooned islands. Everyday an exodus of people is observed, emerging from the dark depths of the impenetrable forests. The destruction of means of communication and road networks has made relief work almost impossible. Even the little that is trickling does not reach the ones who need it for sheer lack of infrastructure.

This is not the first time that our country has been hit by a natural disaster of this proportion. In fact, this is a calamity of moderate proportions, compared with others that we have faced. However, like every other time, we seem to be woefully unprepared to deal with the problem facing us and providing relief to those affected. The authorities are reluctant to take responsibility. The politicians are busy trying to gain mileage out of the situation. No one has time to spare a thought about the poor villagers who have lost not only their homes, but everything — even the land on which they built their homes — and are on the verge of despair.

|| Uttaran Das Gupta

Ominous signals

Are not you moved, when all the sway of the earth

Shakes like a thing unfirm? O Cicero,

I have seen tempests, when the scolding winds

Have rived the knotty oaks, and I have seen

The ambitious ocean swell and rage and

foam,

To be exalted with the threatening clouds

But never till to-night, never till now,

Did I go through a tempest dropping fire

Either, there is a civil strife in heaven,

Or else the world too saucy with the gods

Incenses them to send destruction.

If the result of the recently concluded General Election reflected a radical shift in power equations and political divisions, as far as West Bengal was concerned, then, perhaps, *Aila* and its aftermath reflected the incompetence and apathy of the state government, and, to stretch the analogy in Casca's speech further, it might serve as an omen or sign of further political turmoil.

During the chief minister's visit to a relief camp in Bali, he was told by the victims that there had been complete administrative failure, and state-sponsored relief effort had begun in earnest not more than a few hours before his

the chief minister would, perhaps, prefer to ignore.

|| Aditya Vikram Das

Cyclones and rainwater harvesting

THE unprecedented disaster that was *Aila* ensured that some of our examinations got postponed. While some of us (including me) were feeling agitated about the fact that our examinations had gotten over, others not-so-fortunate ones were getting struck by lightning or having uprooted trees fall on their heads or in front of buses they were travelling in.

The word "cyclone" comes from the Greek word "cyclos" meaning the coils of a snake. *Aila* engulfed in its serpentine gaze many innocent lives. These cyclones were named by a man called Henri Peddington, to whom it appeared that the storms emerging from the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea were like coiled

serpents residing in the sea, and so, he decided to call the storms cyclones.

A cyclone is a whirl in the atmosphere with extremely strong winds around it, causing it to move in an anti-clockwise direction in the northern hemisphere and in a clockwise direction in the southern hemisphere.

Aila ensured that many trees were uprooted and many huts and lives were torn apart. While relief efforts are being carried on, it is also important to note that one must be prepared for times like this. Water, which is essential, should be preserved in order to save many lives.

This week, my article will focus on rainwater harvesting. Rainwater harvesting is a process of gathering or accumulating and filtering rainwater. Rainwater is considered the purest form of water and after adequate filtering it is safe for drinking. While there were parched throats and no real water to drink on 25 May, one realised the importance of rainwater harvesting.

Rainwater harvesting has been going on for years and has been found in many ancient civilisations. In countries where industrialisation is rampant, rainwater harvesting is used to cut costs in terms of water bills, used in order to water crops as well as to produce drinking water. In a scenario where there is, literally, "water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink," rainwater harvesting seems to be a feasible solution.

How does rainwater harvesting work?

There is a collector, which is needed to acquire water and a container required to store it. The collector could be the side of a hill, or a roof or even a solar panel. The container could be a pond of a well or even a valley fortified by dams.

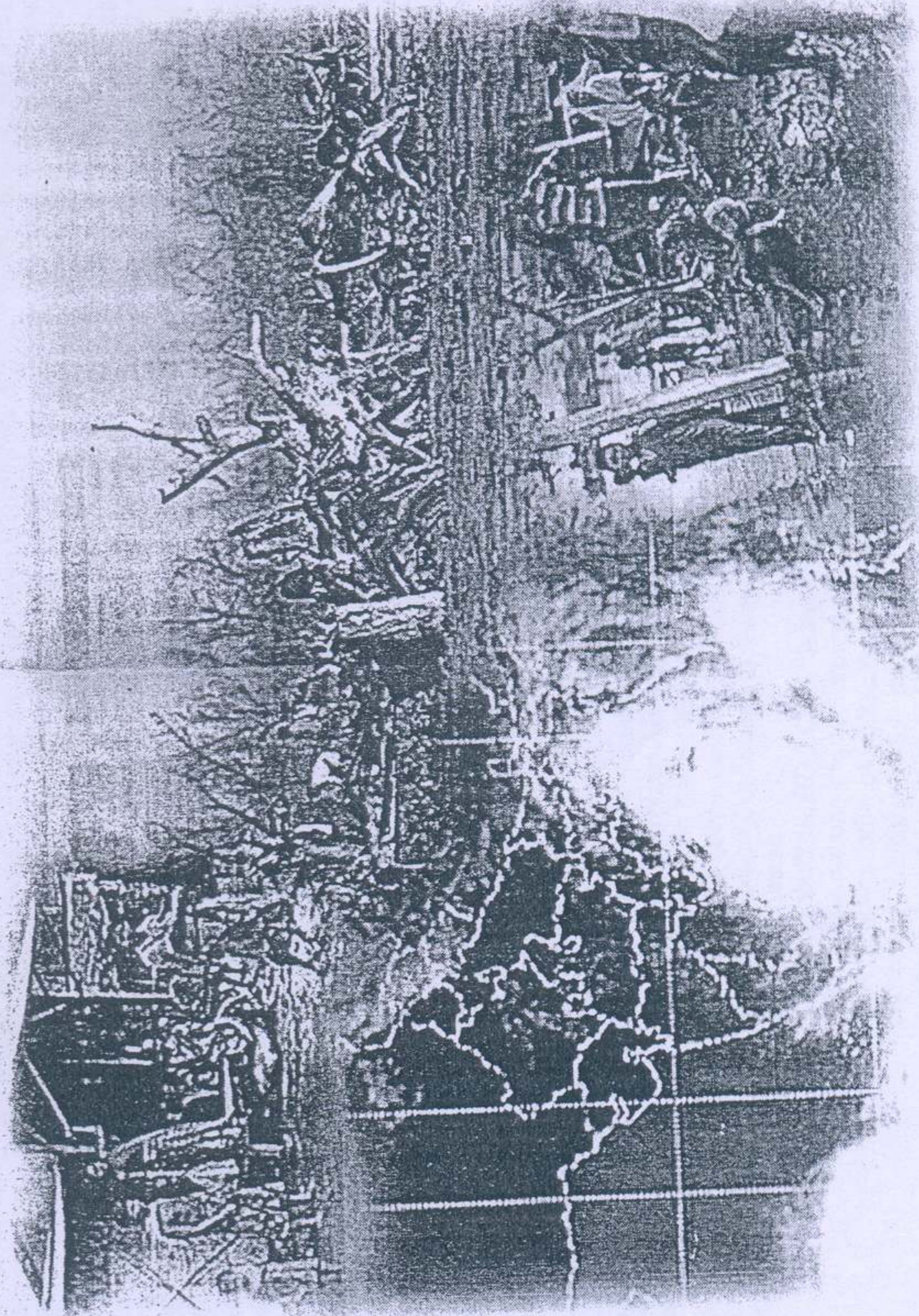
One can bathe in unfiltered water, but unfiltered drinking water is dangerous. The filtration techniques need not be very sophisticated. However, for any type of water treatment and purification, water filtration is always considered a pre-treatment. A sand bed filter, a pop-up filter or a stabilisation tank may be used.

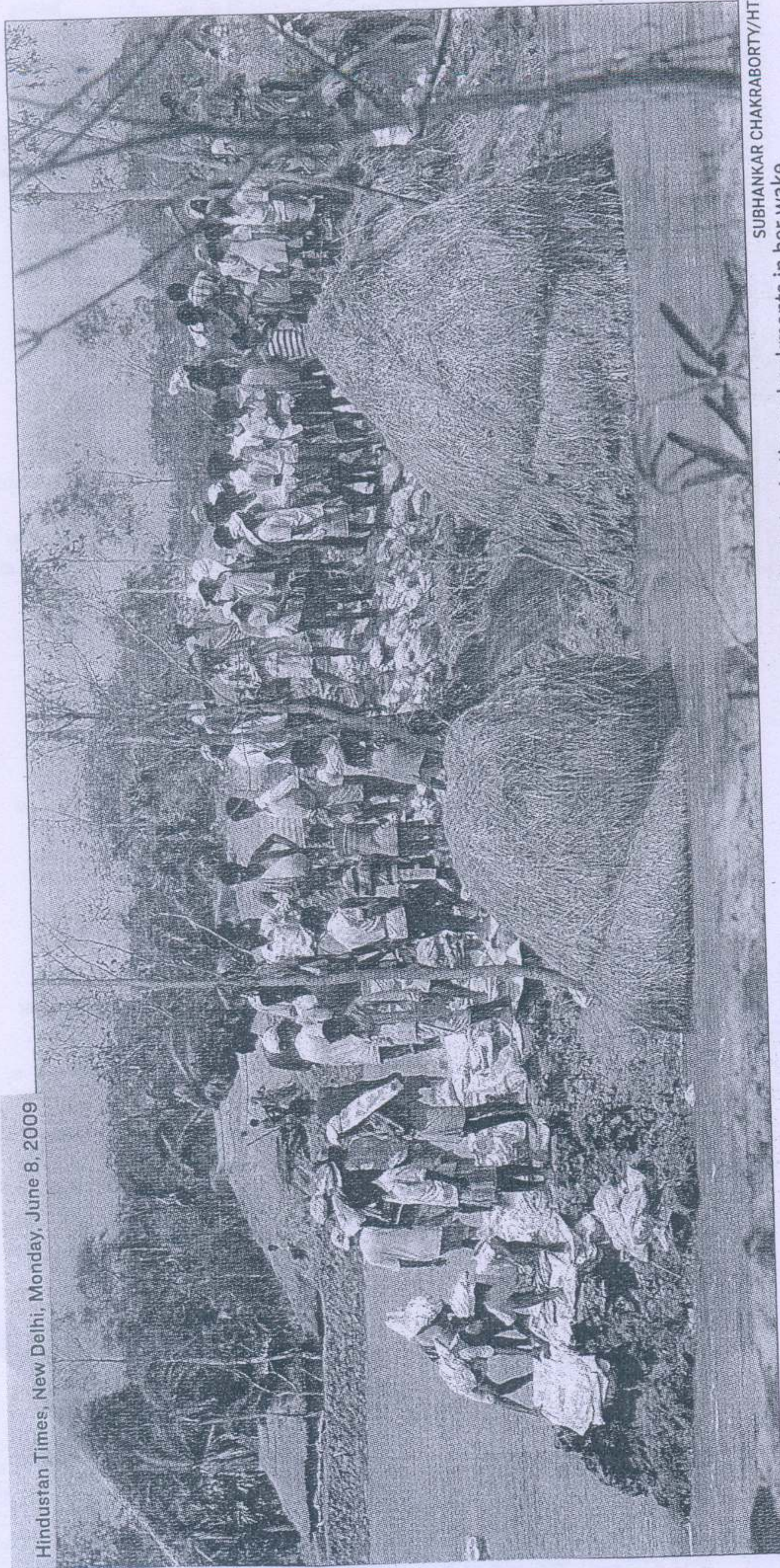
All said, it is also important to remember that as citizens, it is our duty and responsibility to come forward and help in any way we can. There are people starving to death in the Sunderbans while our lives have assumed normalcy. Please do your bit to help these people.

|| Reeti Roy

We would like to urge our readers to collect simple things like dry food items and clothes and to get in touch with local NGOs to have these sent to the people of the Sunderbans.

The authors are students of Jadavpur University, Department of English.





SUBHANKAR CHAKRABORTY/HT

BROKEN: Villagers repair a barrage in Chunakhali village in Sunderbans. Cyclone Aila has left gaping holes in the embankments in her wake.

Tidal waves, disease stalk Sunderbans

Joydeep Thakur and Debdutta Ghosh

Gosaba/Lahiripur, June 7

TIDAL WAVES continued to lash Aila-hit islands in the Sunderbans through Saturday night and Sunday.

Villagers claimed the water level had increased since Saturday and could go up to five metres in low-lying areas by Monday.

"The high tide tolled in at night. In the morning, we woke up to see water gushing in... It was a ghastly sight," said

Jayanta Naskar, pradhan (headman) of Chunakhali village.

The village lies in Gosaba block - one of the worst affected. It comprises 14 villages, 12 of which are already inundated. Communication is cut off.

Since these islands are surrounded by the tributaries of big rivers like the Raimangal and Bidya, the water level is expected to go higher and the damage likely to be more.

Residents of these villages have been toiling day and night to plug the many breaches left by Aila with sand bags. But

there are still gaping holes as wide as 2,500 feet.

A large number of people have fled towards higher grounds. Some have taken shelter on the embankments with the river dangerously close.

Environment experts and wildlife conservationists say the huge displacement caused by the cyclone and tidal waves may force many of the estimated 400,000 people who live among the mangrove forests and creeks and rivers to enter protected forests, thereby threatening one of the richest but most fragile

ecosystems on earth.

In nearby Satjelia, Chiotomollakhali and Gothkhali, there's another killer on the prowl — disease. An outbreak of enteric diseases has reportedly claimed five lives already, four in Satjelia alone, locals said. Officials did not confirm this though.

The central team, which is supposed to visit 11 places to assess damage and oversee relief work, has only reached Lahiripur so far.

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“We have lost everything. For the first three days, we had nothing to eat or drink. Now, people are coming with relief and we get a few handfuls of grain and puffed rice. But we don't feel like eating. The fear of losing our lives has taken over all feelings.”

—SUBOL MAITY,
resident of Kumirmari village

उत्तरकाशी का अभिशाप बना हाइडल प्रोजेक्ट

उत्तरकाशी से लौटकर भारत डोगरा ॥

उत्तरकाशी जिले के ठिकोली गांव पर एक समय प्रकृति की भरपूर कृपा थी। कल-कल बहती भगीरथी (गंगा को देवप्रयाग से पहले भगीरथी कहते हैं) नदी, जरूरत भर अनाज पैदा करने वाले सुंदर सीढ़ीदार खेत, पशुओं के लिए चारागाह व प्राकृतिक जल-स्रोत। पर जब इस गांव में मनेरी भाली पनबिजली परियोजना के दूसरे चरण का कार्य प्रारंभ हुआ तब से गांव की यह सुंदरता और आत्म-निर्भरता बुरी तरह तहस-नहस हो गई।

इस परियोजना पर काम शुरू होने से आसपास के कई मकानों में इतनी अधिक दरारें पड़ गईं कि वहां रहना खतरे से खाली नहीं था। लोगों को कर्ज लेकर नए आवास बनाने पड़े। उनकी

अधिकांश कृषि भूमि बहुत कम मुआवजा देकर परियोजना हेतु ले ली गई। जल-स्रोत सूख गया। नदी में पानी पहले से बहुत कम रहने लगा। स्वास्थ्य समस्याएं बढ़ गईं व परियोजना में नौकरी देने का वादा पूरा नहीं किया गया। नौकरी के लिए शांतिपूर्ण विरोध-प्रदर्शन कर रहे अनेक युवाओं को एक महीने के लिए जेल भेज दिया गया। उन पर मुकदमे अभी तक चल रहे हैं।

परियोजना से प्रभावित आसपास के कुछ गांवों की महिलाओं ने बताया कि पर्व-त्यौहार पर गंगाजी में स्नान करना कठिन है क्योंकि कभी भी बैराज से पानी छोड़ा जा सकता है। शकुंतला ने बताया कि वह हाल ही में बहते-बहते बची। कुछ लोग तो बहकर मर चुके हैं। जंगली जानवर पानी कम मिलने पर सूखती नदी को आसानी से पार कर लेते हैं और गांव पर हमला करते हैं।