

# In Ockhi's wake

**The painful aftermath of Cyclone Ockhi reveals the multiple dimensions of disaster preparedness that still need attention in India**

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*"It was as dark as night at 9am."*

*"The waves were higher than a coconut tree."*

*"We tied ourselves to our boat so our bodies could be recognised..."*

30th November 2017. While scientific terms for it were still being confirmed and relayed on land, hundreds of fishworkers at sea were already hit by the violent terror of a deadly cyclonic storm. More than 300 lives were lost, either battling Ockhi, or in the deathly silence after—tragic conquerors of the cyclone who died exhausted, wasted—waiting for rescue that could not reach them.

'God's own country' is the famous cliché used to describe the stunning beauty of coastal Kerala. This holds true for the entire Comorin coast curving into the southernmost tip of India. In April 2018 though, as we travelled the Kerala and Tamil Nadu coast to film our documentary 'In Ockhi's Wake', this tagline bore out a devastating irony. Churches across the region stood stoic witness to the pain of those mourning Ockhi's victims. A shore famed for its intrepid seafaring fishers was left bereft, with unanswered questions and an unprecedented official number of 348 men dead or missing at sea. There were 205 missing in deep sea in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, and 119 near shore and 24 deep sea casualties in Kerala.

Those that perished in deep sea had sailed earlier and were lost due to lack of connectivity. The lives lost near shore were of fishermen who went out just before the onset of the storm, unaware of the warnings of the Indian Meteorological Department

(IMD) issued on 29th November. Apocalypse, either way. Post Ockhi, many issues are being examined: early warning mechanisms, last mile communication, offshore connectivity, preparedness and training of responders and community, integration of traditional knowledge, post disaster relief and rehab, trauma management. Hopefully the urgency of this will not be forgotten and the gaps will be effectively addressed. Meanwhile, what of the void? For every life lost at sea there are at least two or more connected lives on shore grappling with grief and the desperation of completely altered reality. Aging parents, little children, younger siblings, wives—a trail of anguished families lie devastated in Ockhi's wake.

Vallavilai in Tamil Nadu is known for its skilled deep sea fishers. Of the 33 men lost on mechanised boats from this village, 29 were in their early thirties. In this one village, itself therefore, there are reportedly 20 or more widows in their mid-twenties. In the escalating conversations about preparedness and resilience, do the lives of these nameless women and their small children feature? Except for the efforts of the local parish priest to create therapeutic training centres and build skill, there seems to be no other active support to give these women the agency to take their young lives forward.

And, what of those who came back? Survivors, who faced the ordeal of fighting Ockhi, now struggle through a different agony. They survived the storm only to drown in the ruthless maelstrom of impaired livelihoods, lost investments, and deepening debt. The post disaster learnings must also consider the less visible collateral damage to the lives and livelihood of survivors, in Ockhi's wake.

Editorial note: The documentary film 'In Ockhi's Wake', being made by ICSF, is under production and will be made available on YouTube. Details will be announced in the next issue of *Yemaya*. ❏