

The Indian villagers who lost their homes to the sea

April 26 2024, by Aishwarya KUMAR



Satabhaya is the hardest-hit of several rural idylls along the seafrent in India's Odisha, a state that has also been battered in recent decades by tropical cyclones and floods of increasing ferocity.

The gentle roar of the ocean lulled Indian mother-of-two Banita Behra to sleep each night, until one day the encroaching tide reached her

doorstep.

Behra is among hundreds of people from the disappearing and largely abandoned coastal village of Satabhaya, whose displaced former residents have been officially recognized by the government as climate migrants.

She grew up watching helplessly with her neighbors as rising seas, driven by climate change and upriver dams, slowly claimed the land around them.

"We were doing well there. We used to catch fish," the 34-year-old told AFP. "But the sea came nearer and took away our homes."

Satabhaya is the hardest-hit of several rural idylls along the seafront in eastern Odisha, a state that has also been battered in recent decades by tropical cyclones and floods of increasing ferocity.

Behra's home is now underwater, 400 meters (1,300 feet) out to sea, while a few of her neighbors who refused to move live in makeshift thatched huts by the new shoreline.

A weathered brick wall is all that remains of what was once a seaside temple to Panchubarahi—a locally revered Hindu deity supposed to protect worshippers from natural disasters.



Villagers lead their cattle to graze at a resettlement colony for people from the coastal village of Satabhaya.

Last year the Odisha government announced funds for a resettlement colony in Bagapatia, 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) inland from their village, giving each family a small plot of land and \$1,800 to build a new house.

Authorities said the scheme was the first of its kind in India for those forced to leave their homes by climate change.

But life in Bagapatia has been tough for the new arrivals: without seas to fish and farmland to cultivate, many are depressed by having lost their self-reliance and way of life.

In order to survive, most of the community's men have had to take jobs to work as laborers out of state.

Behra's husband is now away 10 months of the year, working on the opposite side of the country and sending money home to provide for their two young children.

"We miss him, some days I feel like crying," she said. "But what can we do?"



An upriver dam-building spree in the decades since India's independence from Britain in 1947 drastically cut the amount of sediment deposited where the waterways met the sea.

'Growing frequency and intensity'

Rising global temperatures driven by human activity have led to a consequent rise in global sea levels with the melting of polar ice caps.

Odisha, where millions of people live in coastal settlements along the Bay of Bengal, is particularly vulnerable to the encroaching waters.

Satabhaya sits at the mouth of the mighty Mahanadi River Delta and its coasts were once replenished by earth carried by the currents from inland.

But an upriver dam-building spree in the decades since India's independence from Britain in 1947 drastically cut the amount of sediment deposited where the waterways met the sea.

That left Odisha's coasts vulnerable to erosion and lacking a critical defence against rising sea levels.

Across the state, sea levels increased by an average of 19 centimeters (7.5 inches) in the five decades to 2015, according to a 2022 paper coauthored by researchers from the state's Berhampur University.



Children pose for a picture at a resettlement colony for people from the coastal village of Satabhaya.

Tamanna Sengupta of India's Centre for Science and Environment think-tank told AFP that Odisha had the highest number of villages severely impacted by coastal erosion in the country.

The crisis had been worsened by the "growing frequency and intensity" of cyclones and floods in the area, she added.

"Locals have been displaced and those who remain are at risk of losing their homes to intensifying floods," Sengupta said.

'The sea will eat this place'

India remains heavily reliant on coal for [energy generation](#) and is the world's third-largest emitter of [carbon dioxide](#), the gas chiefly responsible for rising [global temperatures](#).

Extreme weather events are expected to worsen as temperatures rise further, with UN climate experts warning the world could see average temperatures 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels within the decade.

Odisha's chief forest conservation officer Susanta Nanda said that more than a third of the state's coast was already eroding due to climate change and other man-made environmental damage.



Extreme weather events are expected to worsen as temperatures rise further.

The urgency of protecting at-risk coastal communities was underscored by the struggles of those already forced to leave their homes, he told AFP.

"It is very difficult for climate refugees to start their lives again," Nanda said.

A 2017 report on migration by the UN Development Programme found that resettling communities affected by climate change was beneficial on balance when done with adequate planning.

But it found doing so also brought new problems for those who had been relocated, including "a lack of decent work" in their new home communities.

Jagbandhu Behra—no relation to Banita—was unable to find a job to support himself in the Bagapatia resettlement colony after leaving Satabhaya.

The 40-year-old moved even further inland in search of hope of greener pastures but remains gloomy about his prospects.

"There's no guarantee that we survive," he told AFP.

"One day the sea will eat this place as well."

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