

A Visit to Kumirmari Amidst Cyclone Dana:

- Sukrit Sen, Pratyasha Nath

On the 24th of October, 2025, we embarked on a journey to Kumirmari, a village nestled in the Sundarbans, as Cyclone Dana loomed on the horizon. With the cyclone's landfall expected between Bengal and Odisha, Kumirmari, located in South 24 Parganas, was under a red alert. Despite the impending danger, the community exhibited a remarkable sense of calm and resilience, viewing cyclones as an inevitable part of life rather than catastrophic events.

As we spoke to the residents, a common theme emerged: cyclones had become a way of life, merely causing temporary disruptions. One villager remarked, "Back in the day, we knew about 'Kalbaisakhi', a localized thunderstorm, but now we face low-pressure systems and storms more frequently. The environment has changed so much." This sentiment resonated with many, as they recounted how the frequency and intensity of these storms had increased over the years.



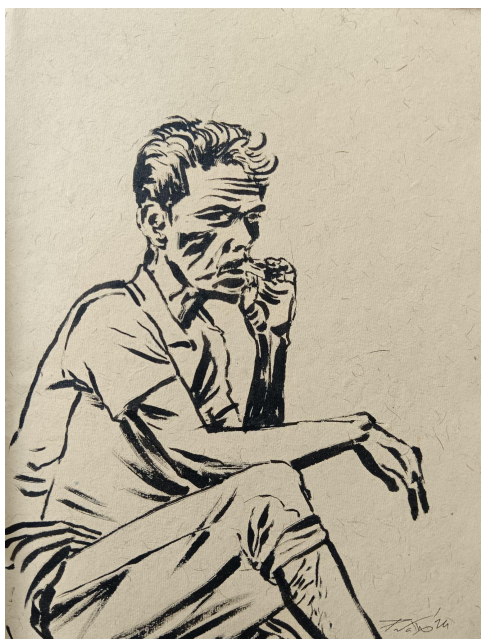
What struck us most was the lack of panic despite the imminent arrival of a super cyclone. Young boys were busy playing a game of football in a really muddy field and what we found most fascinating was that every time they would get a break, they would just dive into the nearby pond to wash all the mud and get back to the field again really quick. People who typically sought refuge in government-built concrete shelters were instead engaged in card games and carrom matches inside them. A fishing couple we met along the river were overjoyed with their catch

of shrimp seed (*meen*), pushed towards the shore by the incoming waves. Meanwhile, community members gathered at the local tea stall, to catch up on the news and debate on whether the cyclone would significantly impact the Sundarbans or not. However everyone seemed happy as most of them interestingly enjoyed a feast of *luchi* and *alur-dom* (fried unleavened bread and spicy potato curry), a combination mostly prevalent during celebrations which in this case was the cold weather and the unforeseen holidays in schools and workplaces owing to the weather.

On asking people about their rather casual approach to a super cyclone, a bunch of men confidently asserted that cyclones with wind speeds of 100-120 km/h were no cause for concern. They only prepare for disaster response when winds exceed 200 km/h. Their keen observational skills were evident as they noted the current low tide of the river due to the approaching new moon, reducing the risk of flooding. However, boatmen capitalized on the situation, raising their ferry prices from 2 (\$0.024) to 10 rupees per person due to the decreased availability of ferry services, yet no one questioned their courage in navigating the swollen rivers and continued traveling; in some cases, even with newborn babies.



Conversing with the women revealed a different perspective. Some mothers were disgruntled at the disruption in their children's school and tuition routines even though the



children seemed glad to catch a break. Although not fearful, the women were slightly more concerned than the men. Their primary focus was safeguarding important documents like IDs, property papers, and educational certificates. They also ensured they had dry food items like puffed rice and biscuits on hand, as cooking during intense rains could be challenging. Some even placed a stool with food, water, and flowers outside to appease Varun Dev, the god of winds, hoping he would relent. The elders lamented about how the younger generation neither believes in such rituals nor takes part in them. They are more inclined to follow updates and bulletins via television, radio and social media and have a practical approach to dealing with the frequent extreme weather. The old man who talked to us at the tea shop in Budhbar Bazaar said "*prokritir sath jog bichchhed hoye gese*" (the connection with nature has been severed) and blamed that disconnect for the erratic weather.

Walking along the unpaved embankments, we struggled to maintain our balance, while the locals seemed to glide effortlessly through ankle-deep soft mud. A lot of these embankments showed evidence of erosion and cracks and therefore a reinforcement of sandbags and bamboo mats, served as the first line of defence against the erosive force of the swelling waves. Tarpaulin sheets peeked through the silt in places. On talking to the villagers who live right next to these embankments, they mentioned that having lived in mud houses mostly they relied on these high spots during severe cyclones in the past too when floodwaters encroached into their homes. In some cases residents often used makeshift branches to reinforce their mud houses, leaving their safety to the whims of nature.

Farmers expressed their frustration over the untimely arrival of the cyclone, which threatened their crops. The excessive rain caused the paddy seeds to swell and shatter, reducing the quality and market value of their produce. This was particularly disheartening during the yield season, when they hoped to reap the rewards of their

hard work. "The soil is not as fertile as it used _____ to

be," was a common complaint. Samaresh da, who was showing us around, pointed at the sandbags and tarpaulin sheets as culprits. "Mainly the paper (sic)." Colloquially called 'paper', these plastic sheets are widely used to keep out saline water or protect ripe crops from heavy rains but their adverse effect on the soil health is also well recognised by the locals. "We should use less of them but what alternative do we have?"



Experiencing the Sundarbans during a cyclone was surreal. Heavy downpours turned bustling neighbourhoods into desolate landscapes, with stacks of parked cycles, shuttered shops, and empty markets evoking a ghost-town atmosphere. Yet, pockets of life persisted, with men flocking to shared smokes and card games, providing a glimmer of hope. As dusk settled, the sky displayed an array of stunning hues—brilliant oranges and deep blues—that painted a breathtaking backdrop. This vivid display reminded us that however gloomy or grey things might seem, there's always light at the end of the tunnel. Preparations for the storm never got in the way of the unwavering hospitality of the people of the Sundarbans; everywhere we went we were invited to tea and animated conversations. Their smiles and ability to carry on with their lives, albeit at a slower pace, challenged the perception of the people of the Sundarbans as vulnerable victims of climate change.

On the morning of the 25th, as the cyclone neared landfall, we woke up to the sight of a solitary papaya tree standing tall against the gusts of wind and rain. A shrivelled dead leaf swung loose from its equally dead stalk, testament to the ravages done by a previous storm. Yet, stubby new greens and young luscious fruits sprouted from the crown, in open challenge to all the cyclones that have been and those yet to come.

