

# **Prospering despite adversities: Experiences of women displaced due to climatic shocks**

A case study from Bagapatia village in Rajnagar Block, Kendrapara, Odisha,  
India

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## Context

In recent years, climate change has caused the displacement of numerous groups of people worldwide<sup>2</sup>. One region that has suffered the wrath of climate adversities is Satabhaya, located on the coastal side of the Kendrapara district in Odisha state, India.

Satabhaya used to be a cluster of seven villages (*Sata* in the Odia language means *seven*, and *Bhaya* means *brothers*). However, with rising sea levels and coastal erosion, all of these villages (Gobindapur, Mohanpur, Chintamanipur, Badagahiramatha, Kharikula, Satabhaya, and Kanpur) were lost. Satabhaya was adjacent to Paradeep Beach and suffered erosion due to the destruction of the natural sea barrier of dense mangrove forest. An attempt was made to prevent sea erosion by fortifying the area with stone walls. However, this generated waves that eroded the north side of the beach<sup>3</sup>. As per the National Center for Coastal Research,<sup>4</sup> Odisha lost 28% of its 485 km coastline between 1999 and 2016 because of seawater intrusion. In 2012, the State government initiated the rehabilitation of the population from these villages. They were to be rehabilitated to a location called Bagapatia, approximately 15 km away. However, while the villagers were rehabilitated, many lost their livelihoods and land.

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<sup>2</sup> Grandi, Filippo. "Climate change and disaster displacement." UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/environment-disasters-and-climate-change/climate-change-and>. Accessed 15 August 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Mohanty, Debabrata. "Odisha to build India's first resettlement colony for climate change victims." Hindustan Times, 30 April 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/odisha-to-build-india-s-first-resettlement-colony-for-climate-change-victims-101682866922705.html>. Accessed 17 July 2023.

<sup>4</sup> "NCCR." NCCR, 14 July 2023, <https://www.nccr.gov.in/>. Accessed 17 July 2023.



Bagapatia is a relocation settlement and a village located in the Rajnagar block of the Kendrapara district, Odisha state, India. I have visited this village twice, during December 2022 and July 2023. I conducted group discussions with several groups of

villagers in a mixed-group conversation, as well as with men and women of the village separately. I also interviewed the gram panchayat sarpanch (the local elected leader). This was made possible with RCDC's support and was crucial for my understanding of displaced populations. Interviewing these groups gave me different perspectives on relocation and its impacts. The village has around 571 families living in 19 lanes. 148 more families have received land allotment letters but are still waiting to get possession.

Meanwhile, 99 families were identified to get plots but have not received any allotment letter or possession. Some people were entirely left out of the rehabilitation program. All of the families are struggling to get pattas or Records of Rights (Land title deeds). Unfortunately, this means that it is nearly impossible for them to get bank loans. Bagapatia's population is primarily women, as around 80 % of



men have migrated to Kerala to earn a living. They also go to Tamil Nadu into the plywood or textile business. The women raise the children and tend to the household in the village. The infrastructure of Bagapatia adds another level of issues. One such example is the road leading to the school. It is not an all-weather road, so attendance falls during monsoon seasons despite parents' eagerness to send their children to school. As demonstrated, the resettled population faces a complex variety of issues in Bagapatia.

### Women's Livelihoods in Bagapatia- their new home

By examining the gender perspectives within this context, the distinctive experiences, difficulties, and possibilities women in Bagapatia confront, can be uncovered. While relocation to a new place has created challenges for everyone, the effects of displacement are particularly pronounced for women. They struggle with various issues, such as losing traditional roles, shifting social dynamics, and growing responsibility. There was an interesting dynamic between the ages of the women and their perspectives on said roles. During a group discussion, I noticed that the elderly women, one in particular, felt strongly about maintaining these traditions.

In contrast, younger women were more casual and less inclined to do so. In Satabhaya, their roles were primarily household-focused– looking after the kids, cooking, and cleaning. Their exposure to community-level decision-making and broader level of influence was minimal due to patriarchal standards. Losing livelihoods like farming and fishing impaired women's economic agency and increased their vulnerability.

People in Satabhaya fished and practised agriculture/horticulture for their livelihoods. Having close access to the sea meant that the women had enough seafood to put on the plate and meet the nutritional requirements of their families. Nourished by the organic manure, the land was fertile, and the women had just to sow the vegetable seeds to get a good harvest.

In Bagapatia, the skill of fishing or gardening was on the back burner. When they first arrived, the Bagapatia soil was swampy and would hardly grow any vegetables. In fact, much of the relocation money they were each given was spent on filling the land. The river flowing by the side of the village was infested by crocodiles, making it too challenging to fish. Therefore, the women had to diversify and upgrade their skills to earn a living. All women in Bagapatia who moved from Satabhaya were compelled to learn new skills to continue with the previous livelihood options or diversify their skills to learn something they had never done.



Project Pragati, being implemented by the Regional Centre for Development Cooperation (RCDC), is one such step in the right direction to help relocated families overcome their difficulties and adjust to a new way of life, especially women.

Project Pragati aims to empower women and solve these gender-specific issues. The project acknowledges the importance of interventions for preserving the well-being and adaptability of the impacted families. It includes numerous

crucial components that support and advance women's empowerment and gender equality. It is important to understand that Project Pragati was designed specifically to address the strategic needs of the women displaced due to climate shocks. However, if these women had stayed in Satabhaya, then there would have been no such intervention for them.

First, it concentrates on providing opportunities for skill development and training that are specifically catered to women's requirements. It promotes microenterprise development at individual and group levels and vocational training. Examples include tailoring, vegetable cultivation, cow-keeping, goat rearing, and managing a poultry business. The project improves their ability to adjust to changing conditions and develop sustainable livelihoods. Women who have returned from abroad also started tailoring units, making use of their newly-learned skills.



Women in Bagapatia are increasingly playing a role in

deciding on household financial issues and daily costs, like purchasing livestock, household furnishings, budgeting, and savings. Thanks to this financial responsibility, they can efficiently prioritize their families' demands and distribute resources. This control can boost their esteem and positively impact their capabilities of managing the community together.

A good example of this is the Abhinnasundar Self Help Group (SHG). SHGs are ubiquitous community institutions in rural and peri-urban India. Millions of (mainly) women are participants in SHGs, which are formed with a membership of a group of women (commonly, 15-25 members), who engage in small savings and loan activities. Government of Odisha has been promoting an initiative called 'Mission Shakti'<sup>5</sup>, and which has spurred the SHG movement in the state.

The Abhinnasundar SHG was formed with 12 members of Magarkanda village, Lane 12 of Bagapatia. However, member cooperation decreased due to poor recordkeeping, internal borrowing, and loan repayment anomalies. A resolution hadn't been passed for three years. It needed to be strengthened because it was effectively a non-existent SHG. In early 2023, RCDC's members met with the group to discuss improvements that could be made. They passed a resolution and trained the members on the proper maintenance of records. RCDC also facilitated opening a bank account with the State Bank of India branch in Gupti. Thereafter, the group was sanctioned Rs 2 lakh loan by the Bank and the Odisha Livelihood Mission to purchase goats under the goat-farming scheme. The group put the money to good use to purchase 30 female goats and two rams with the first instalment of Rs 46,000/- and have ordered more with the second instalment of Rs 69,000/-.

The women of the SHG not only have group accounts in the bank but also individual bank accounts in which they receive remittances and/or save money. This is not a common practice in rural India, where women are known to have individual bank accounts. Having bank accounts, making regular transactions, and visiting the bank enhance women's capacity to understand various financial services. Many women also are deft at using mobile money transfers like Google Pay.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://missionshakti.odisha.gov.in>



The program also emphasises the value of women's input in decision-making and community improvement. It promotes their participation in neighbourhood-level initiatives, including creating self-help groups (SHGs). Each SHG consists of a minimum of 10 members. The groups are forums for conversation and experience sharing.

These platforms enable women to express their worries, seek emotional support, and collectively explore solutions to their challenges. When asked how the presidents and secretaries are picked, the SHG leaders were proud to share that it is a democratic process. The women chosen are articulate and able to represent their community well. With most men of Bagapatia having migrated to other States in India like Tamil Nadu and Kerala for work, it becomes crucial that women take advantage of the opportunity and be able to disrupt the patriarchy. This is extremely beneficial to the development of the community as there is more confidence in the leaders. Having solid structures in place helps to strengthen the foundations of building a new life in Bagapatia.

Women who actively participate in decision-making can rally for their needs in response to urgent issues like getting their families access to resources, healthcare, and education. This helps the community to develop further and become more outspoken. It also means a more inclusive approach to solving various issues. Moreover, traditional gender norms are questioned, and women's contributions to Bagapatia can be more acknowledged.

On a wider level, these women leaders have made inroads into government offices and been invited to meet the officials. In one such instance, the leaders were asked to meet the Chief Minister of Odisha, Mr. Naveen Patnaik, to raise their concerns about living in Bagapatia and to share their experiences and demands.



After being relocated to Bagapatia, the women in the village are responsible for making household decisions. With their spouses working abroad, they have gained more independence in making immediate decisions. While bigger decisions are made with their male counterparts, most are made by women. This would not have been possible if they had not been relocated.



The other positive outcome of displacement that women echoed equivocally was the benefit of staying closer to services, especially health and education. Women shared that when in Satabhaya, they can recall many instances when

pregnant mothers lost their lives, their babies', or both. Most babies would be delivered at the house through the help of a midwife. Any complication during delivery would leave no chance for survival as the road to the nearest hospital was non-existent, and the swampy soil made it difficult to transport the pregnant women, who would be generally carried in bamboo baskets. Having come to Bagapatia, the health center is close by, and they have had not a single case of pregnancy-related death of the mother or the child.

Secondary schools being close to Bagapatia also meant that girls could continue with their higher education. By having access to these fundamental services, they can benefit for many generations.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the relocation of families from Satabhaya to Bagapatia due to climate change has significantly affected the lives of women in the village. Despite the difficulties brought on by the loss of conventional livelihoods, women seized the chance to develop new skills and diversify their sources of income, giving them greater economic autonomy. RCDC's Project Pragati, which strongly emphasized skill development, vocational training, and microenterprises, has significantly contributed to



women's empowerment. Women have actively contributed to community development through self-help groups and increased participation in decision-making, breaking age-old gender conventions and promoting inclusive governance. Future generations are likely to benefit from Bagapatia's accessibility to vital services like healthcare and education, which has improved maternal and child health outcomes and allowed girls to finish their education. The relocation to Bagapatia has offered not only difficulties but also opportunities for women to develop their leadership, resiliency, and economic independence, changing both their lives and the trajectory of the community.

Economic participation- There has been an increase in the economic participation of women through the SHGs. Participation in market activities, including negotiating with buyers for goats, chicken, and other produce, etc. By developing new skills and diversifying their sources of income, women achieve greater economic autonomy. An increasing number of women are also able to interact with the formal banking system (the nearest bank branch is about 1 ½ km away). While they were engaged in various other livelihood/ subsistence activities while in Satabhaya (collection of firewood, fishing and crab catching, vegetable garden, etc.), most of these activities did not earn them money, and the produce was used at home. Given the economic vulnerability of the villagers (requiring many to travel to other states for work), the increased participation of women in activities that augments the household income is much valued at the household level.

Social participation- After relocating to Bagapatia, there is an increased number of women participating in the village meetings, including in issues related to the village development and discussions with visiting Government officials in the rehabilitation village. Including women in these higher decision-making levels helps provide a unique perspective to improving life in Bagapatia. This is crucial if we want to ensure that there is equal development for all the relocated villagers, irrespective of gender.

Reversal of traditional 'gendered' roles at the community and household level- It is difficult to assume whether the role reversal will remain permanent at this stage. Women are now in charge of most decisions and play a significant role in the community, but if and when the situation stabilizes, will they continue to hold this

influence? I do believe that future generations of girls will be influenced by seeing their mothers take on such different roles. There's a definite possibility of a long-term change in values, as demonstrated by the greater participation, especially that of the girl youth, including greater freedom to travel to nearby towns such as Rajnagar (25 km away) and Kendrapara (appx 80 km away). As mentioned before, the younger girls were less inclined to continue fulfilling traditional roles.

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