

GUJARAT

Hurricane Havoc

IT WAS a visitation of grief and destruction, a cruel twist to the suffering Gujarat was already shrouded in. Meteorologists first noticed the brewing cyclone over the Arabian Sea on November 5, 1,200 km to the south-west of Goa. Forty-eight hours later it was just 600 km to the south-west of Bombay, and heading rapidly for the city. As storm warnings went up in Bombay port, city administrators prepared for any eventuality by warning schoolchildren and office-goers to stay home the following day.

Early on November 8, the radar at Bombay (range: 400 km) picked up the by then severe cyclone and thereafter kept it under constant surveillance. Then the storm suddenly veered on a north-north-easterly course towards Gujarat. It hit somewhere between Veraval and the Union territory of Diu that evening. By midday November 9, the cyclone had simmered down to a depression. The damage it wrought was yet another example of how fickle the weather gods could be.

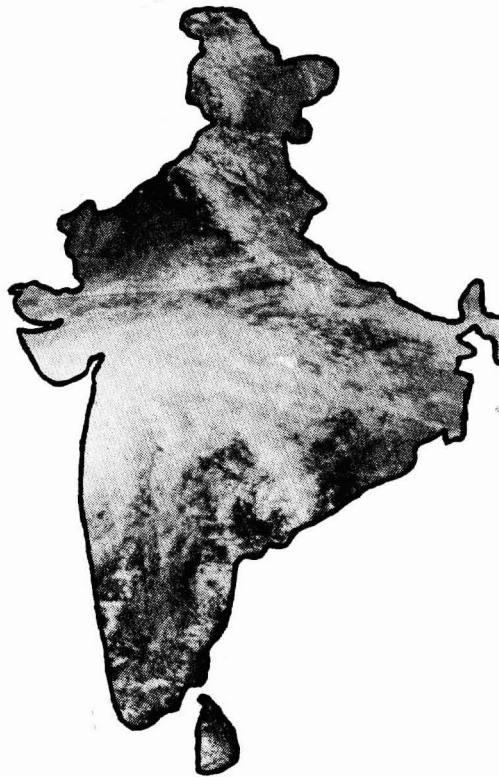
Severe Damage: More than 50,000 sq km of Gujarat's coastal districts bore the brunt of the cyclone. Veraval town looked as though a giant hand had chopped through its houses and trees, leaving behind water to a depth of a metre and a half. The gale exceeded 200 kmph in speed, and Bhavnagar and Baroda suffered crippling electricity failures.

The storm left its mark on northern coastal Maharashtra, too. Winds of 90 kmph lashed Raigadh and Thane districts, and a 500-tonne oil tanker sank at the ferry wharf in Bombay, while an oil derrick with 350 people aboard began drifting dangerously towards the Gujarat coast.

Once again, the administration in Gujarat had been caught totally unprepared. Chief Minister Madhavsingh Solanki, who was in Delhi, managed to get back to his state only when he accompanied Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and Rajiv Gandhi on the obligatory aerial survey of the cyclone-struck areas on November 10. Home Minister Prabodh Raval coordinated much of the panic-stricken, post-facto relief operations—which were in any case far from satisfactory.

The cyclone took a steep toll. The Government's official estimate (which could be much below the actual figure) put the total number of deaths at

380—one of the worst-ever. Amreli and Bhavnagar districts were the worst hit, and huge stretches of coconut and groundnut land was laid waste. Rajkot alone lost cotton worth Rs 29 crore, and cold storages in Veraval—which handle much of India's fish exports—began to warm dangerously due to power failure. At least 60,000 dwellings were destroyed in the hurricane, and 4.5 million people



Satellite picture of the cyclone: devastating fury

were affected in 4,500 villages. At least 28,000 people had been evacuated until November 10; the loss of cattle amounted to 30,000 heads.

The death toll could not have been authoritative, because relief teams found themselves cut off from the affected towns for as long as 72 hours after the cyclone had passed. Una town, for instance, had to be linked up by the Space Applications Centre via the APPLE satellite for four

hours of contact every day with the outside world. The extent of damage in Bhavnagar, Kheda, Amreli, Broach, and Panchmahal districts, said affected people, was much more than any government official could guess at.

Calamities: Mrs Gandhi issued the usual statement promising all help to the stricken state. But the fact remained that the cyclone had struck at a particularly inauspicious time. Fishermen on the Saurashtra coast had disregarded storm warnings, and put out to sea. Until November 11, at least 42 boats had sunk and 600 more were missing from Dwarka, Okha, Salaya and Porbandar ports.

Worse, Gujarat had been reeling under an unprecedented drought this year. Just two weeks before the cyclone hit, the state Government announced that 10,000 of the state's 18,725 villages were scarcity-affected, and the Central Government had been desperately petitioned for 85,000 tonnes of wheat, rice and coarse grains. The state Government's estimates, then, were that more than Rs 200 crore would be needed in Central assistance to tide over the drought. To top it all, Gujarat was blighted by a severe shortage of electricity, the shortfall touching 700 mw by end October.

It was ironic that the cyclone should bring water to areas that had been the most drought-hit—Amreli, Panchmahal and Broach districts, for instance. But it was a case of the pendulum swinging from one extreme to the other, just as Orissa had, two months earlier, been struck first by drought and then by a cyclone. Government officials in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar seemed numbed by the rapid succession of calamities, and it looked at fortnight's end

as if an already beleaguered Centre would be able to only partially salve the wounds.

Cyclones are an essential part of the mechanism by which excess heat received from the sun in equatorial latitudes is conveyed towards higher latitudes. If there were no cyclones, equatorial heat and polar cold would intensify to unbearable limits. That Gujarat played its part in maintaining this balance was the unkindest cut of all.

—CHAITANAYA KALBAG