

CITIZEN ACTIONS RESPONSE

Civil Society Response to

ODISHA TRAIN TRAGEDY

IMPACT DOCUMENTATION

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Designed and Published by **Citizen Actions Response**, in public interest, to document and present the efforts of the civil society organizations during the Odisha Train Tragedy at Bahanaga, Balasore in June 2023.

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OPENING NOTE



The Odisha Train Tragedy was a devastating train accident that affected and shocked the entire world. It was one of the deadliest train disasters of its time, resulting in the loss of many lives. The news of the train disaster in Odisha was beyond comprehension and shook everyone who witnessed the tragedy.

When we got the message, it was our duty to bring together interested civil society organizations and civil society activists to come, discuss, reflect, and prepare an emergency plan of action. In response to the tragedy, various organizations, including NGOs, social movements, and social development organizations, came together to coordinate civic action. Government agencies, UN agencies, and international organizations were also invited to join the efforts. The goal was to ensure a collective and coordinated response to avoid duplication of efforts.

Volunteers were dispatched to the scene of the accident to assist the victims in nearby hospitals. The volunteers also facilitated trauma counseling for those affected and helped victims approach railway authorities for compensation and entitlements.

One of the challenging tasks was managing the deceased and supporting the bereaved families. Volunteers worked tirelessly to ensure dignity in death and assisted families in the transport of the remains to their homes.

The collective action of civil society organizations and volunteers played a crucial role in reaching out to those in need and providing essential support. However, it was noted that better coordination between official systems and civil society is essential in such crises.

Adequate resources, including medical personnel and individualized treatment plans, are vital in handling the aftermath of disasters like this train accident. The collaboration between the government, civil society, and the community is key to a smooth and effective disaster response.

Jagadananda
Co-founder, CYSD

THE CONTEXT

The Balasore train tragedy in Odisha, India, led to a loss of life of 296 people, with over 1200 wounded. Central and state government agencies led a massive rescue, recovery, & restoration operation in the aftermath.

Citizen Actions Response emerged as an initiative by civil society organizations to provide humanitarian support to the affected.



CITIZEN ACTIONS RESPONSE



Citizen Actions Response emerged as various partners in civil society in Odisha began responding to the Odisha Train Tragedy, and came together to ensure a collaborative, collective, and coordinated response.

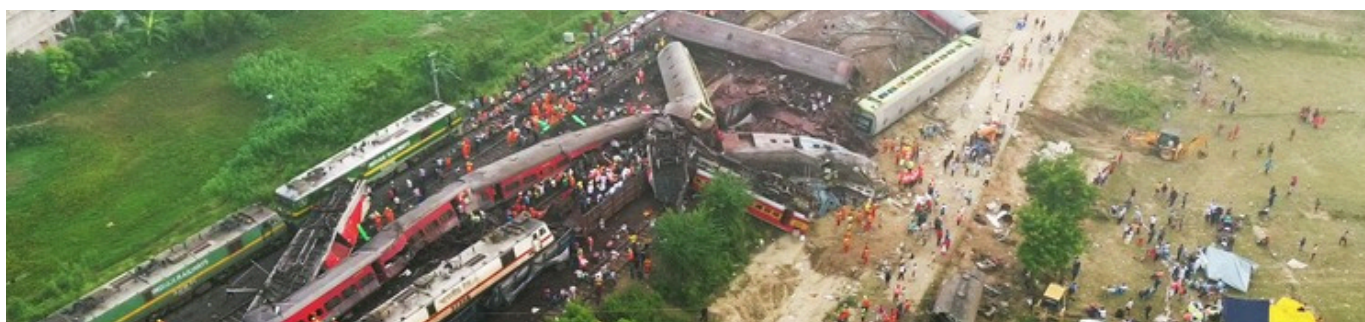
In the rapidly evolving situation of the disaster, many partners from across the world joined the Citizens Actions Response banner with each passing day.

CAR supported the response by supporting the identification of needs, dissemination of requirements, and coordinating the mobilisation of resources, and grassroots activities by partners.

Coordination and support from the CAR collective tried to ensure that partners at the frontlines were well equipped and the needs of the people were appropriately served.

CAR's response to the disaster can be categorised into three phases:

- (1) Immediate humanitarian response
- (2) Supporting the recovery, entitlement facilitation, & safe return
- (3) Long-term physical and psycho-social care & response



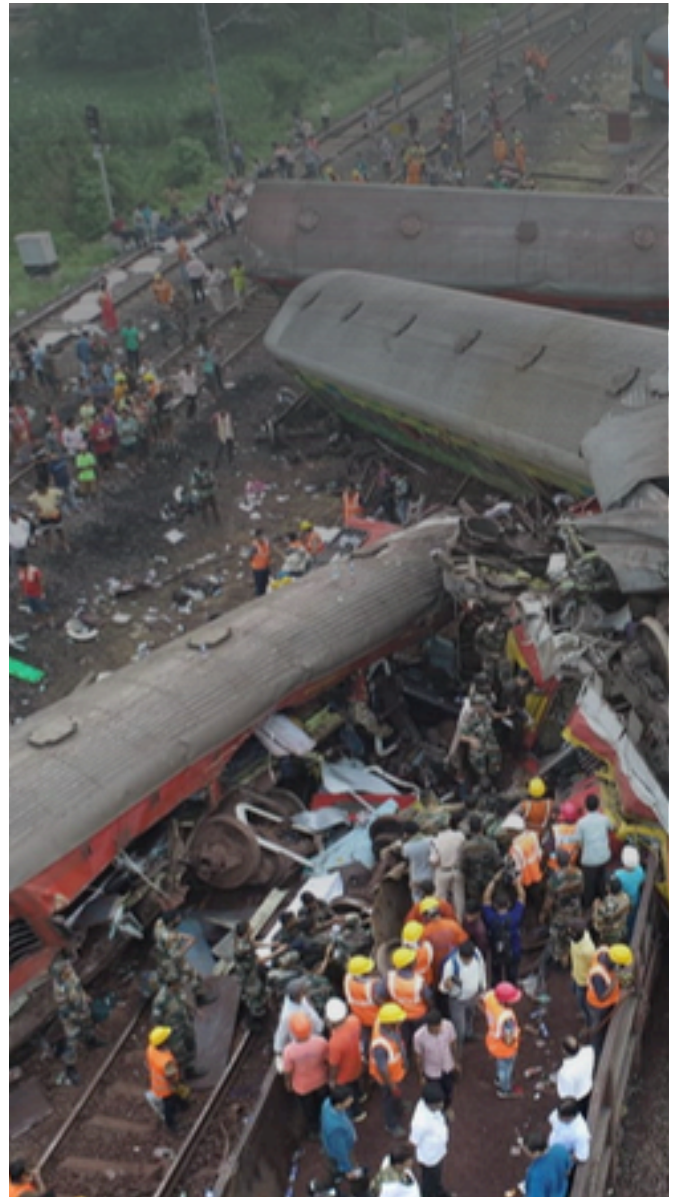
HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

In the aftermath of the disaster, the government's coordinated multi-agency rescue effort focussed on moving hundreds of passengers who were in the trains to the nearest health facilities based on their needs. Passengers who were critically injured were moved to advanced hospitals able to provide the required level of care.

First responders, rescue teams, railway staff, police, journalists, and many more groups of people were present at the incident site, along with a high level of movement of government leaders from various states and the centre.

Hundreds of relatives of passengers had started coming to look for loved ones moving from one hospital to another.

From the early hours of June 3, volunteers mobilised by **Yuva Vikas Foundation** assisted in various activities at the site of the accident, supporting the rescue and relief teams in serving the victims.



CITIZEN ACTIONS RESPONSE: ODISHA TRAIN TRAGEDY



In Bhubaneswar, **Citizen Actions Response** emerged as many civil society organisations convened at **CYSD**, along with many organisations joining the response call virtually. Immediate response measures were discussed, partners on the field provided situation reports, and an action plan was drawn to supplement the official response.

A team led by **Dr Mamta Pradhan** and **Madhusudan Das** immediately rushed from Bhubaneswar to Balasore and aided the grassroots response. The team quickly identified various immediate needs of the injured passengers and arranged for the provision of various necessities, coordinating with partners.



CITIZEN ACTIONS RESPONSE: ODISHA TRAIN TRAGEDY

Free kitchens were set up by **Citizen Actions Response** on the same day, facilitated by **Yuva Vikas Foundation** to provide food for over 500 people every day in Bahanaga and Balasore for several days.

As passengers affected by the disaster belonged to various states of India, many of them found themselves in healthcare centres without any of their belongings – having lost their money, phones, clothes and more. Language was also becoming a barrier to communicate with medical staff and express their needs and issues.

Citizens Actions Response mobilised volunteers at the two major treatment sites of Balasore DHH and Bhadrak DHH to coordinate the civil society response.

Fresh pieces of clothing was provided to the passengers to support them in maintaining their hygiene. Common medicines and other essentials such as sanitary pads were also provided to the women. **Women SHGs** as well as volunteers from various youth groups including the **NSS** supported in this early distribution of necessities to the injured.

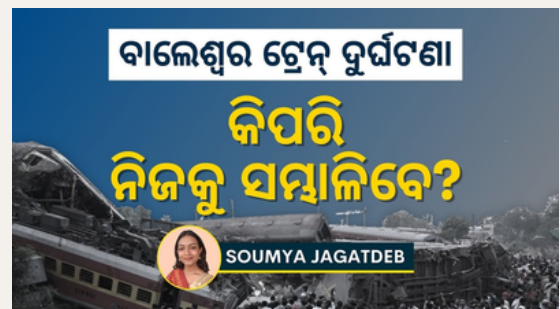




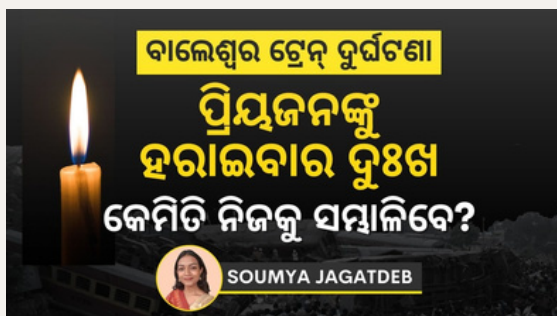
The deeply distressing tragedy was the centre of attention for the media nationally. Distressing visuals were telecasted, various accounts of the survivors and the relatives of the deceased were published, and the suffering was expressed all over social media.

Recognising this scenario, **Swasthya Plus Network** with technical support from **School Initiative for Mental Health Advocacy (SIMHA)**, **TISS** produced Odia language public health communication videos focusing on managing the grief and trauma as a result of an incident of this magnitude.

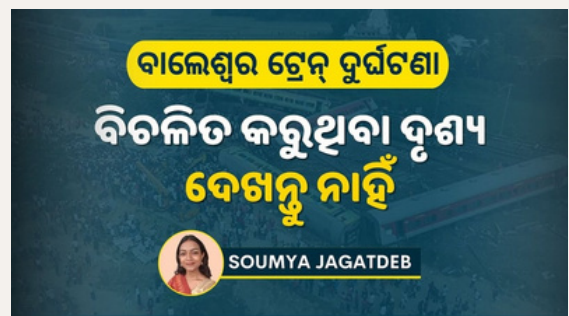
Soumya Jagatdeb (Psychologist), supported as an expert talking on these subjects. The videos were available publicly on YouTube and Facebook and were viewed by over 10,000 people.



ଦୁର୍ଘଟଣା ପରେ ନିଜକୁ କେମିତି ସମ୍ଭାଳିବେ?



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CITIZEN ACTIONS RESPONSE: ODISHA TRAIN TRAGEDY



As the death toll from the disaster was in the hundreds, the mortal remains of the victims were initially kept near the site of the incident before being transferred to Balasore and finally to Bhubaneswar.

The Central and State government worked together to ensure the transfer & preservation of the remains and facilitating the identification of the remains through visual means as well as DNA analysis.



SUPPORTING RECOVERY, FACILITATING ENTITLEMENTS & SAFE RETURN

After the initial days of the disaster, the rescue operations concluded and track restoration activities were in full swing. The focus moved away from the incident of the disaster to the care facilities where the injured were being treated, as well as the facilities where the mortal remains were stored for identification and transport.

At the same time, there was a large influx of relatives of the passengers who were reaching Bhubaneswar with the hope of finding their loved ones. Many of the relatives did not know the health status of their loved ones – whether they were undergoing treatment or had lost their lives in the tragedy.

Every passing day, many passengers with minor injuries were discharged from various hospitals and provided with transport support to return to their home states.

Hundreds of distressed relatives spent several days – still looking for their loved ones, or waiting for their recovery, or in the process of taking the handover of the mortal remains. There was immense pain and suffering and hopelessness in their eyes and hearts.



Patient Support

Citizen Actions Response identified the need to provide individualised patient support volunteers to augment the care provided to the injured and their kin at various care facilities across the state.

Yuva Vikas Foundation led the efforts at Balasore DHH, patients in Bhadrak DHH were supported by **Pragati Jubak Sangh**, and at SCB Cuttack - volunteers from the **National Youth Project** coordinated the response.

YSD and many other CAR partners provided ongoing food and clothing support to the injured and their kin at the various facilities. Specialised efforts were also made to identify needs for advanced care - experts from **Open Learning Systems** assessed any non-medical needs for children.

Open Learning Systems also set up a Disability Cell, and along with **SMRC** assessed the injured for any need for assistive devices, specialised care, and other kinds of support.

Citizen Actions Response also established contact with the **Bihar Inter Agency Group (BIAG)** to continue the care and support for the train accident affected from Bihar.

CAR shared relevant information about the affected from Bihar so that the CSOs in Bihar could ensure follow ups as well as receipt of entitlements by the affected.



Psycho-Social Support



Citizen Actions Response identified a need to quickly and appropriately extend **Psycho-social Support** to help respond to the trauma experienced by the injured passengers as well as the large number of relatives who had come from across India.



Counsellors with support of **AAINA** and **SEEDS** were on the field, with many more volunteer counsellors providing online counselling to the bereaved in multiple languages. Tablets were used to provide counselling support as well as linking the injured with their family members who were far away, with video calls.

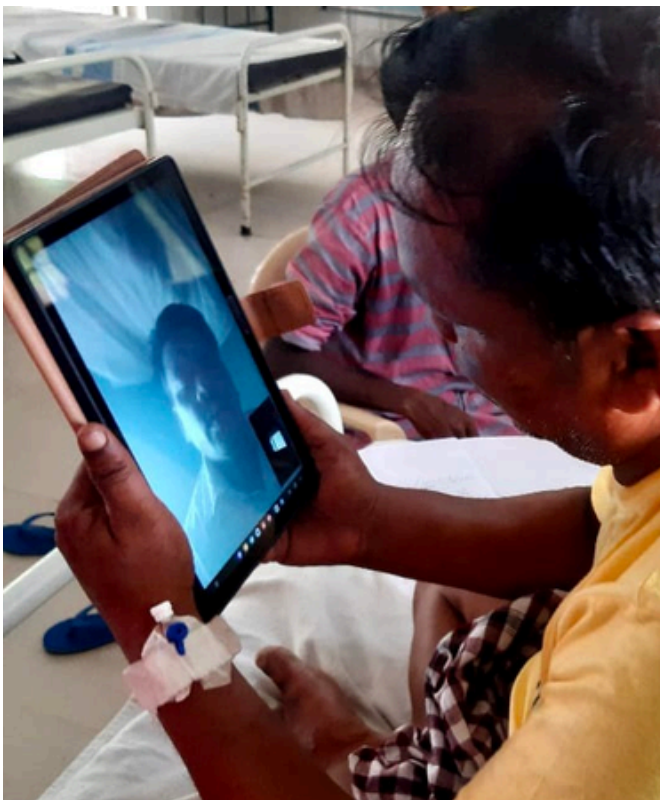
Supported by **AAINA** and **SEEDS**, counsellors with **Yuva Vikas Foundation** interacted with the injured and their relatives in Balasore.



Gayatri, a counsellor who volunteered during the crisis described the experience as challenging and difficult, "It was difficult hearing the stories filled with so much pain and anguish."

Raghu, who supported survivors in Balasore, noted how they reassured a lonely couple that the volunteers were like their own family members, ready to support for any and every need.

In Cuttack, the Psychological First Aid Centre was set up by **Open Learning Systems** as a nodal point for serving psychosocial support needs.



Supporting the Next of Kin



Supporting the next of kin of the deceased was a cornerstone in CAR's approach in responding to the tragedy. The volunteers of **AMURT** played a pivotal role in supporting the family members of the deceased at AIIMS, Bhubaneswar. **CFAR** volunteers were active at private hospitals across Bhubaneswar to support in the process of identification, handing over and dispatch of the mortal remains.



Volunteers of **AMURT** stepped up to help the local administration facilitate the identification and hand over of the remains to the next of kin. The volunteers also provided food support to the loved ones, and assisted in handling of the remains. **CFAR** also joined in to provide food support for the return journeys of the families.



Dignity in Death

As more and more relatives collected the mortal remains for transport, the physical handling and transport became a challenge. Coffins became an essential need for the dignified transport of the deceased, and procurement to ensure adequate stock was taken up on a war footing.

Coffins were mobilised by **CFAR** with funds support of **DonateKart**. **JAGRUTI** supported in the procurement and the coffins were moved to Bhubaneswar with transport support by **POPET** - reaching AIIMS Bhubaneswar.

This collaborative, urgent effort, supported the government initiatives by AIIMS and BMC, supported by the **AMURT** team at AIIMS Bhubaneswar.

Citizen Actions Response's collaborative and integrative approach enabled organisations to respond decisively and rapidly as new needs emerged.

The availability of coffins ensured a dignified transport of the mortal remains over long journeys back to their homes.



Supporting Mobility Needs



Many of the physical injuries due to the train accident were blunt force and serious bodily injuries – leading to the loss of limbs for many of the passengers.

The disaster led to the development of physical disabilities that required long-term support for the injured to lead a healthy, dignified, and productive life. **Open Learning Systems** and **SMRC** were actively involved to assess the situation and respond.



Open Learning Systems distributed assistive mobility devices such as wheelchairs and walkers based on a need assessment to support the injured.

These devices were procured with support of **DonateKart** facilitated by **Udyama**. The devices were provided based on need as recovered patients were discharged and returned to their homes from health facilities.

Assisted Mobility Devices Support *Mobilised by Various Partners*



50+ Wheelchairs



50+ Walkers



Facilitating Entitlements

The Odisha Train Tragedy affected thousands of loved ones of those who were deceased or injured. Central government and various state governments announced ex-gratia amounts for the affected. Many were also eligible for receiving compensation from insurance. Additionally, several private organisations had announced measures to support the affected.

Despite immense efforts by the government to ensure a simplified process for the disbursement of claims, there were many challenges to navigate the system.

The **Adhikar** team along with other CAR partners held many discussions with the Railway tribunal and other agencies to understand the process and guide the eligible persons to successfully process their claims.

In some cases, even months after the disaster, some injured persons and the next of kin of deceased had not approached the Railway tribunal due to misconceptions and hesitation. **Adhikar** led an effort to counsel and facilitate the interaction with the authorities, which enabled the sanction of the ex-gratia amounts.

CAR had a special focus to ensure that nobody is left behind and procedural issues do not hinder in the transfer of the benefits to the affected.



Long Term Care

As weeks went by after the disaster, and the Train Tragedy went from global headlines to the pages of history, Citizens Actions Response recognised the need to support the long-term care and rehabilitation of the affected.

Many of the physical injuries due to the train accident were blunt force and serious bodily injuries – leading to the loss of limbs for many of the passengers. The disaster led to the developing of physical disabilities that required long-term support for the injured to lead a healthy, dignified, and productive life post the tragedy.

Partners from Citizen Actions Response made several follow up visits to the homes of the survivors of the tragedy. These visits aimed at identifying any needs for intervention, as well as ensuring that they had received the eligible entitlements from the government.

Yuva Vikas Foundation led follow up visits as part of the Project Punarjeevan Initiative.



Central Coordination & Documentation

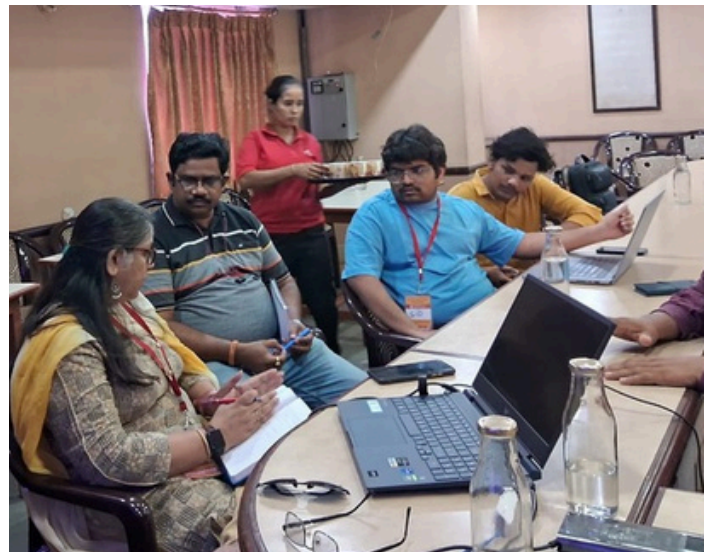
Citizen Actions Response worked together as a coalition of diverse partners across Odisha, India, and the world, bringing in various kinds of expertise and resources to help the persons affected by the Odisha Train Tragedy.

Communication, Coordination, and facilitated Collaboration were critical for a cohesive and comprehensive response to the unfolding crisis.

CAR's central coordination efforts were housed at CYSD, and supported by **CYSD, AAINA, Natya Chetna, and IFI Foundation**.

IFI Foundation & OdishaLIVE supported the overall documentation efforts of the response activities, from the daily bulletins during the crisis to the overall video documentary and impact documentation.

Many partners as well as other organisations from across the world supported the response of CAR. CAR's role during the Odisha Train Tragedy - supplementing the official response by mobilising people, resources, and expertise when needed - showcases the role civil society can play together with the government to respond to a crisis.



OUR RESPONSE IN PICTURES

CITIZEN ACTIONS RESPONSE

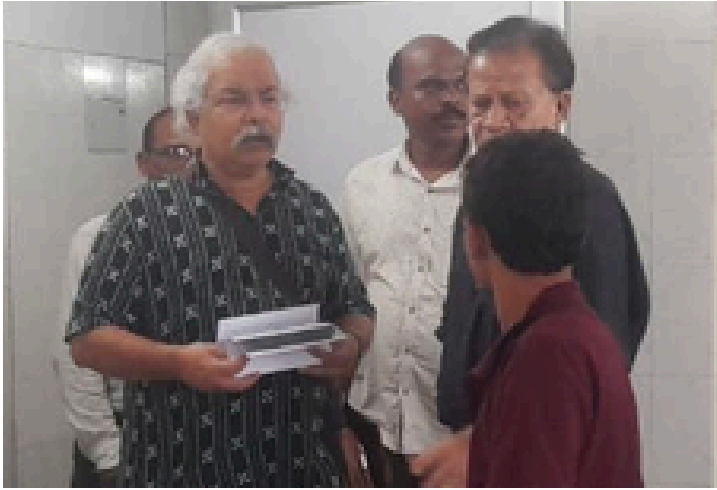
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CITIZEN ACTIONS RESPONSE: ODISHA TRAIN TRAGEDY



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CLOSING NOTE



The dedication and compassion displayed by members of civil society and volunteers during the extraordinary times of this crisis were truly commendable. Among the challenging tasks they undertook, assisting in the management of the remains of the deceased and supporting bereaved families stood out as an exemplary demonstration of their selflessness. With unwavering commitment, volunteers ensured dignity in death by handling the remains with utmost care and respect.

Recognising the importance of mental well-being during such challenging times, our volunteers actively engaged with those affected, offering a compassionate ear and a comforting presence. Their empathetic approach and understanding helped survivors and bereaved families navigate through their grief, providing much-needed solace and strength.

In light of the Odisha Train Tragedy, there is a pressing need to establish a well-trained and prepared team of volunteers who can respond promptly in the event of a disaster. Proper orientation and training should be provided to this team to ensure effective coordination of rescue and relief operations.

One of the critical lessons learned from the tragedy is the necessity for a cadre of psycho-social counselors. After every disaster, there is a significant search for counselors who can provide much-needed counseling to the victims on the ground. Hence, it is essential to prepare and train a specialized team of psycho-social counselors in advance, capable of reaching the affected areas and offering counseling support to those in distress.

The Odisha Train Accident in Bahanaga, Balasore District, Odisha, left an indelible mark on the nation. However, the response from various organizations and volunteers showcased the power of collective action during a crisis. Through proactive measures and efficient coordination, communities can mitigate the impact of disasters and promote resilience in times of adversity.

Sneha Mishra
Secretary, Aaina

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