No crops, no **brides**: how rising seas are killing India’s coastal villages

**As the sea inundates Odisha’s coastline, livelihoods have withered with the harvest and weddings are a rarity as young women refuse to move to areas where they see no future**

In Udaykani, a coastal village in the east Indian state of Odisha, the walls of houses **were once adorned with** the marriage **motifs** of **conches** and shehnais, an oboe-like instrument played at weddings, considered **auspicious** for bride and **groom**. Today, the designs have faded. The village, once **a hub of joyous** celebrations, has not welcomed a bride in more than a decade.

**With the sea on one side and fields on the other,** Udaykani, along with neighbouring Tandahar village, was hit hard by a [super-cyclone](https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/nov/01/naturaldisasters.weather1), **the most intense** ever recorded in the northern Indian Ocean, that **lashed** the state 25 years ago. Along with **the growing environmental volatility** of the Bay of Bengal over the years, it has meant a rise in soil and **water salinity** and subsequent **loss of agricultural land**, livelihoods and **marriage prospects**.

“When the soil turned salty, our crops **shrivelled**,” says Vaidehi Kardi, 64, a Tandahar resident*.*“Gradually, the water too turned salty and our lives **withered**. It has become difficult to get our sons married. Everyone feels our village is not safe any more.”

With its [4,700-mile (7,500km) coastline](https://www.india.gov.in/india-glance/profile#:~:text=The%20total%20length%20of%20the,Nicobar%20Islands%20is%207%2C516.6%20km.&text=The%20Indian%20peninsula%20is%20separated,Indian%20Ocean%20to%20the%20south.), the Indian **subcontinent** is exposed to nearly 10% of the world’s cyclones, according to India’s [National Disaster Management Authority](https://ndma.gov.in/Natural-Hazards/Cyclone). **The Bay of Bengal records four times as many cyclones as the Arabian Sea on India’s western coast.**

Odisha state has recorded [28% **erosion**](https://www.nccr.gov.in/sites/default/files/schangenew.pdf) along its 280-mile coastline. [The state **assembly** heard](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/16-villages-along-odisha-coast-gone-under-seawater-state-assembly-informed/article66645443.ece) last March that 16 villages in the state had **disappeared under the sea** and 247 other villages face the same **fate** as sea levels rise.

“It took us a long time to recover from the **devastation** after the super-cyclone [of 1999],” says Budheswar Kardi, 74, of Udaykani. **The sea had moved inward so we relocated farther inland. We tried to gradually revive our lands but without much success. Now it feels like the sea is moving inwards every year.”**

“Today, we have bachelors in their 30s who are yet to find a suitable match.

**“I asked my son to migrate, not just to find a job but also a wife.** We usually have certain restrictions when it comes to **matrimonial alliances**, but I don’t wish to impose any on my son. I want him to be well settled.”

It is not just **marriage prospects**. With the increasing soil salinity making water undrinkable, even friends and relatives **are loath to** visit. “Anyone who comes to visit us never stays the night,” says Kanchan Swain, 50, from Tandahar. “For one, we don’t have water that’s fit to drink. Even bathing **is out of the question** for visitors, who fear **skin ailments**.”

**The villagers have to barter their grain or oil for drinking water from villages 10 miles away.**

**The salinisation of farmland** is one of the most **pressing environmental concerns**. According to a [study](https://www.fao.org/global-soil-partnership/resources/highlights/detail/en/c/1458974/) by the [UN Food and Agriculture Organization](https://www.fao.org/home/en) more than 833m hectares of soil worldwide are already salt-affected, as is 10% of farmland, while some estimates suggest [high salinity affects **a third of irrigated agricultural land**](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4336437/), with the figure increasing by 10% a year.

As **farmland succumbs** to the rising levels of salinity, **traditional livelihoods hang in the balance**. “What is left in the village for us to

“**We have practised agriculture for generations, but today the land fails to yield**. **What option do we have other than to send our children away?”**

**Coastal villages are now home to mostly elderly men and women, left behind to tend to their land as the young people move away. Although neither jobs nor life partners are easy to come by even after migrating.**

“My work here is not **permanent**,” says Abhijeet Pradhan, who moved to Hyderabad. “I work at a hotel as a waiter. I have **switched three jobs** in the last two years; whenever I am out of work, I return home. Who would agree to marry someone with such **an uncertain future**?”

A 32-year-old man from Udaykani, who did not want to be **named**, said he had been rejected four times by women who his family approached.

“Every prospective bride who visited my home **was apprehensive about** her future,” he says. “My parents have asked me to find a girl and get married in Chennai, where I’m currently working.

“But I have yet to **make up my mind** about whether I want to get married to someone **with** so many cultural differences and so far away from home,” he says. “Also, how can I sustain a family – wife, parents, **younger siblings** – on a **meagre salary** of 17,000 rupees [£162] a month?”

**Kardi’s father, Jagannath, 53, reminisces about flourishing fields and abundant harvests. “**We tried to revive our crop [yields] but the salinity had **taken its toll**,” he says. “**Our crops never grew to their full capacity**. The vegetables we cultivated attracted pests. We could **barely** manage to harvest enough for our own consumption, let alone sell the produce to earn a living.”

Udaykani and the other nearby villages once had **wells**, **aquifers** that were **replenished** and **boreholes for irrigation** but repeated cyclones damaged all of them, **rendering the groundwater saline**. **Since then, villagers have relied on rain-fed agriculture, with the major crop being rice.** This means the harvest and revenue vary from year to year depending on the rainfall and soil condition.

“The impact of climate change has become gradually **visible** in these villages, **prompting** the **forest department** to plant casuarina forests to **mitigate** the impacts of **sea ingression**,” says NA Ansari, a social activist in the region and owner of a community radio station **disseminating** information on the climate crisis. “**But there has not been a proper assessment yet of the damage, and impending consequences, to help these villages.**”