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Title of the Session: Faultlines in Indian Cities' Disaster Response Strategy: a Case Study of Srinagar Floods

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Summary

How well-equipped are our Cities to face natural disasters? How should Cities strengthen their disaster response mechanism and create new structures to cope with this growing threat? As the scale and intensity of natural disaster increases in different parts of the world, these questions are being increasingly discussed among the law-makers and disaster management experts, city planners and architects and civic and municipal authorities across the globe. As Cities increasingly become "Engines of Growth" and rapid urbanization pulls hundreds and millions of people towards urban areas globally every year, the resilience of our Cities to face disasters – both natural and man-made is becoming increasingly important too.

Context

How well equipped are Indian cities to cope with Disasters? Do they have an institutionalised disaster response strategy which works? The broad idea of this interaction essentially flows from my own work in covering the devastating floods in Jammu Kashmir in September 2014, especially Srinagar - the summer capital of strategically the most important border State in India.

The devastating floods in Jammu and Kashmir in September, 2014 marked a watershed in the history of disaster management in India. It exposed the fault lines in this strategically important border state's disaster relief and response mechanism. Considered the worst since 1902, the devastation unleashed by the floods was unprecedented: it destroyed two-and-a-half lakh ('lakh' stands for 100,000) homes and made millions homeless.

Significantly, the weak and fragile homes of poor were one of the first structures to get washed away in floods. As the flood crisis unfolded, the plight of flood victims made the Supreme Court to intervene. The apex court termed the relief and rescue operation as "too inadequate for such a huge disaster". The struggle of the flood victims to seek urgent relief and rehabilitation leads us to an important question: Should the victims of a natural disaster be given a legal Right to Compensation?

India is one of the most disaster-prone country in the world. According to the National Policy on Disaster Management, "58.6% of the landmass is prone to earthquakes of moderate to very high intensity; over 40 million hectares (12% of land) is prone to floods and river erosion; of the 7,516 km long coastline, close to 5,700 km is prone to cyclones and tsunamis; 68% of the cultivable area is vulnerable to drought and hilly areas are at risk from landslides and avalanches". It is ironic that despite a high degree of vulnerability to disasters, for almost six decades after independence, disaster response strategy was 'reactive' and

'relief-centric' in approach. The enactment of the Disaster Management (DM) Act in 2005 was the first serious effort to restructure India's disaster response strategy from a 'relief-centric' approach to a more proactive "prevention, mitigation and preparedness-driven" approach. It has been almost ten years since the DM Act was enacted.

Worst Floods in Jammu and Kashmir Since 1902

It was the worst floods to hit the Kashmir valley in more than a hundred years. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs in its Report tabled in Parliament (December, 2014) argued that such a flood situation in Kashmir, particularly in Srinagar, had not been witnessed since 1902. The scale of devastation was so huge that large parts of Srinagar city remained submerged in flood waters for more than three weeks.

The devastating impact of this deluge was felt in 5,642 villages of which 2,469 were in Kashmir valley while 3,173 were situated in the Jammu region. It destroyed 2.54-lakh ('lakh' stands for 100,000) houses and severely affected paddy, fruit, maize and vegetable crops in around 6.51-lakh hectares of cropped area. Official figure pegged the loss of human lives at 287.

The huge devastation caused by floods was visible everywhere in and around Srinagar: from major hospitals to the Secretariat, from mobile towers to power and gas supply stations: most of the critical infrastructure laid submerged in flood waters for days making it difficult to provide basic civic amenities to flood affected populace.

Fear of Epidemic

As healthcare infrastructure collapsed, the fear of an epidemic loomed large in many places with dead bodies of animals floating in stagnant flood waters. I saw many dead bodies of animals floating in the canal adjoining the Jawahar Nagar locality a week after the flood waters had entered this low lying area of Srinagar. The state government did not seem to have the wherewithal to deal with the serious threat it posed to the hundreds of families living in open make-shift tents along this canal.

Relief and Rescue Operations

In one of the biggest relief and rescue operation ever launched in post-independence India, more than 2.9-lakh persons were rescued. The Indian army alone had deployed more than 30,000 troops with 17 choppers and 224 boats. The Indian Air Force deployed 30 transport aircrafts and 53 helicopters to air winch flood victims stuck in worst flood-affected areas and drop relief materials in remote inaccessible areas.

Nevertheless, the scale of the tragedy was huge, and help and rescue mission didn't reach a large number of people stranded in inaccessible areas. At some places irate mob of flood victims pelted stones and attacked security personnel involved in relief work. More than 40 boats of National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF) were destroyed as anger rose over late arrival of relief and rescue effort in many flood hit areas. Some air force choppers involved in relief and rescue operation were even pelted with stones.

Disaster Management Strategy

As I travelled from one flood-affected area of Srinagar to another, I could see that a large number of flood victims had no access to shelter, clean drinking water and other basic civic amenities in many areas. I saw thousands of people forced to live out on the roadside in open makeshift tents in Bemina. No viable epidemic prevention strategy seemed to be in place. The flood victims had no option but to line up for aid at make-shift medical camps. In fact, it seemed that there was no culture of disaster mitigation in place nor an effective risk reduction strategy in disaster prone areas.

Struggle for Relief and Compensation

It is the poorest of the poor who are the worst victims of any natural disaster. When the flood waters entered Srinagar and other towns, the weak and fragile homes of poor were one of the first structures to get washed away. I met a large number of migrant labourers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in Srinagar, who had lost their source of livelihood and were desperately searching for aid to survive the aftermath of the flood tragedy. To make matters worse, many had lost their identification documents making it difficult for them to stake claim for any compensation from the state government.

Most of them were poor, their homes had got washed away in floods and they had no money to move out of the disaster zone. Already fragile and financially insecure, floods had further aggravated their problem. In Srinagar, thousands of poor flood victims could be seen pleading with authorities for urgent relief and compensation many days after the floods had created havoc in the valley.

A Right to Compensation to Disaster Victims

The struggle of the poor and the underprivileged migrants in Jammu and Kashmir to seek urgent compensation to survive the aftermath of floods leads us to an important question: Should there be a Rights-based paradigm to address the issue of compensation to disaster victims?

Should the existing Disaster Management Act be amended to incorporate a legal right to compensation to disaster victims? If so, how would the financing and resourcing mechanisms need to be?

Should uniform national standards for grant of compensation be codified in the DM Act?

Should there be a fixed timeline for fixing the quantum of compensation to the worst affected disaster victims?

Such a legalized institutional mechanism to grant compensation to disaster victims would be especially significant in high flood-prone areas where poor have to face the wrath of floods in every monsoon season.

As the scale and intensity of disasters increases across the globe, it is also posing a challenge to the existing disaster mitigation norms in force to meet this global threat. Considering the

rising socio-economic cost of these disasters, especially for the poor and vulnerable, it is incumbent upon the global community to continuously reformulate its response to the growing threat it poses.