Craft In The Aftermath of Disaster

Generating Independence as well as Incomes

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Duryog Nivaran Perspective

Dominant Perspective	Duryog Nivaran Perspective
Disasters/conflicts viewed as an evnt.	Disasters/conflict are part and parcel of the normal process of development.
Linkages with conditions in society during normal times less analysed.	Analyzing linkages with society during normal times is fundamental for understanding disasters/conflicts.
Technical/Law and Order solutions dominate.	Emphasis on solutions that change relationship/structures in society. The objective is to reduce people's Vulnerability and strengthen their Capacity.
Centralised institutions dominate the intervention strategies. Less participation of people.	Participation of people paramount in intervention strategies.
Implementing agencies less accountable and their processes less transparent to people.	Ensuring accountability and transparency emphasized.
Interventions are made after the event occurs.	Mitigation of disasters/conflict the fundamental aim.
The objective of intervention is to return to situation before the event.	Disasters/conflicts viewed as opportunities for social transformation.

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Roti, Kapada aur Makaan - bread, clothing and housing - are the obvious, immediate pre-requisites for any disaster-hit community. But after that, people who have lost everything need something more - to restore a sense of self-worth and to give a shape to the future. Most disaster responce efforts do not have this balance.

DASTKAR is a registered, non-profit organisation for crafts and craftspeople. We offer support services including organisational and production systems training, design and product development, credit and marketing assistance to traditional craftsproducers all over India over more than a decade.

In India, as is in most parts of South Asia, crafts pepple exist in almost all settlements. It is not uncommon to find more than three types of crafts in a village. Some areas, such as Kutch in Gujarat, have a wide and valuable range of craft. Women do almost all stages of craftwork. Loss of incomes as well as loss of precious culture is suffered after a disaster.

Officially, the only disaster we at DASTKAR mitigate is the on-going disaster of the marginalisation of the unorganised sector by the industrialised, organised one. Unofficially however, we have been involved in earthquakes and floods in Bihar, drought in Kutch and Karnataka; cyclones in coastal Andhra; communal riots in Ahmedabad, Lucknow and Delhi; and plague in Gujarat. The craftspeople we work with - without insurance coverage, credit facilities, bank balances or backup stock - are among those most drastically affected by any disaster that hits the normal rhythms of their life. And their loss is hardly counted in making relief estimates.

Disasters have a spread effect. They impact on many more than the actual victims in the immediate vicinity. For example, disrupted train schedules and communication systems and canceled transport services after the Latur earthquake or the plague epidemic prevented crafts groups from attending Bazaars, dispatching export shipments, receiving vital

orders and advances. Such financial loss is absorbed by the poor artisans on their own. Post-Ayodhya riots in Lucknow prevented chikan craftswomen from coming to the SEWA Centre for three weeks: they could not either get new work or receive much-needed payments for previous work. Their life and work was on hold.

Paradoxically however, because the materials with which craftspeople work are generally locally, easily and cheaply available, and the machinery of production is usually only their hands, a needle or a simple set of tools, craft can often be the quickest and most inexpensive mechanism to economically rehabilitate a traditional community.

Sadly, relief agencies (whether Governmental or International) often don't seem to want to use indigenous, traditional solutions, however cost-effective, and cause-effective. Perhaps they do not show up dramatically enough in their balance sheets, or their Annual Reports. My own view is that simple, indigenous, participatory solutions, though less spectacular, are often more sustainable.

I happened to be in the Darbhanga district of Northern Bihar immediately after the Bihar earthquake and resultant floods in 1989. My trip - a design workshop with Madhubani craftswomen to develop new ranges of kurtas, sarees and soft furnishings - had been long planned. Instead of a peaceful week among the mango groves, I arrived to a scene of devastation, chaos and despair. Whole villages had been submerged: human lives and lifestock lost: foodstuff, clothing, savings, shelter ripped apart and swept away in the quake crevices and flooding waters: all round and almost complete loss.

The State Government had organised temporary camps for the thousands rendered homeless. Because of the logistics of housing, feeding and enlisting so many, the camps were located near city of Patna. People were reluctant to leave their homes and the only hope of salvaging anything, retrieving their lost cattle and goats. Living in temporary tented shanty towns, subsisting on handouts, far away in Patna, five hours away by bus, a couple of days journey by foot, meant post-poning re-building their shattered homes and lives. Sudden loss was followed by forced

uprooting: double vulnerability. We were able to persuade the local administration that the money and food grains allocated to each household should be given instead to local village committees in those nearby villages across the river NOT affected by the flood. Householders in these villages then each accommodated one flood-affected family from another village (using part of the money and the food grains to cover expenses and the additional mouths to feed). Beneficiaries were saved the shortages, infectious diseases and corruption that are endemic in m refugee squatter camps. People were able to go back to their own village every day, repair their houses, gather fodder, look after their livestock, drain water-logged fields, dry any salvageable grain, gradually resume work and the regular routines of their lives. They also came to terms to their loss in more direct manner.

Simultaneously, we organised credit and raw materials for the craftswomen and planned a rush production of specially developed products for an Exhibition Sale in Delhi. The objectives were :

* to create much-needed employment and income locally through the production and sale of the products;

* to create public awareness of the disaster and raise money and donations of clothes and medicines through the exhibition (which included photographs, anecdotes and statistics regarding the affected villages and victims.); and

* to make the craftwomen active, and independent partici pants in their own rehabilitation - both economically and socially.

As a result, though the local authorities had been reluctant to re-structure their original strategy, the process of re-construction was much quicker and less costly, both money and manpower-wise, than the first action plan. It was also much more user-friendly and long-term in its impact.

A word of warning though, artifically created marketing devices for income generation which may be effective in the short term because they cash in on the sympathy wave, are in the long-term unsustainable, unless they are built on truly marketable skills. Few of the subsidised products made by the widows of the Delhi 1984 riots, or those produced by the Latur earthquake victims, have found a regular market. Strategies should be build on people's strengths rather than their weaknesses. They must also be fully thought-through in terms of linking disasters with development efforts.

Let me give another example. The Gujarat Government Drought Relief Scheme was a paradigm of a good idea which over-ambitious and un-planned implementation turned into a long-term tragedy. Kutch, isolated and poor, has traditionally been a drought-prone area. Its people, predominantly dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry for livelihoods, are hardest hit by the vagaries of the weather gods. Regular droughts are common.

But the members of local tribal communities, both male and female, aided by the seasonal nature of their work cycles and reacting to the barren, brown landscapes of their environ, have always created extraordinary crafts to ornament their clothing and habitation. Every surface - be it village wall, cart wheel, camel harness, utensil, or clothing - is decorated, painted, carved, embroidered, and woven.

So, this rich repository of skills was an obvious mechanism for income generation and employment when six years of successive drought struck Kutch in the late '70s and early '80s. Instead of breaking stones for a living, craftswomen, through the Gujarat Government Drought Relief Scheme, were able to feed their families by the skill of their needles. Since they were not dislocated from their homes and children, they were able to care for them as well. Crafts products procured through the scheme were sold throughout India, creating a proud identity for Kutch rather than one of need and charity.

But the Gujarat Government, carried away by the initial success of the scheme, extended it to indiscriminate bulk purchases of craft products.

Anyone able to ply a needle or string a bead jumped onto the bandwagon of easy wages, resulting in a glut of cheaply produced bad products. The flat 10 rupee a day rate given for all products, however labour intensive or high value, inevitably brought down standards as skilled craftspeople reduced their skill levels to match the low returns. There was no design input or product development to create new products to effectively utilise the production capability of this huge, new workforce. Relief started damaging local work and work ethics.

Enormous stock piles of shoddily finished, tacky merchandise mounted up to be sold through the government owned GURJARI's three existing emporia. Since no new marketing and promotional strategies were employed, or new marketing avenues created, they were eventually reduced to selling the stocks at subsidised discount prices at distress sale. The poor standard of Kutchi crafts today, the heaped piles of cut-rate Kutchi embroidery on Janpath pavements in Delhi and the boredom with which sophisticated urban consumers react to "mirrorwork", the disrepute that GURJARI has today in the eyes of craftspeople, are a silent witness to a disaster strategy that went disastrously wrong.

For craftspeople, like us, a safety net of savings, insurance and strategic investment can prevent the dependence and loss of dignity subsidy causes.

The impact of droughts or floods or riots on artisans, hawkers, homebased producers, landless labour or providers of community services such as barbers or dais is mostly not accounted for. Their loss and suffering remain overlooked.

Finally, a few general suggestions :

1) fund research into innovative strategies for both short-term and long-term economic regeneration of disaster-hit or disaster-prone communities;

2) study and evaluate the successes and failures of using traditional craft as a means of employment and disaster alleviation;

3) document and share indigenous and traditional solutions to recurring disasters; and

4) disseminate the basics of disaster management in vernacular languages through grassroots organisations in disaster-prone areas.

Disasters, as one of the women in Kutch so rightly said, are seldom unexpected Acts of God. They come with a lot of warning and are often man-made, not natural, caused by failures of technology and planning. So research and case-histories of WHY disasters happen and the signs to look for, should be disseminated and studied too, not just by "experts" but by local communities themselves. Investments are needed in buildingcommunity's capacity to reduce its vulnerability.

Networking is such a well-worn concept. But, to an outsider like myself, the experts and activists, bureaucracy and army, foreign and national donor agencies (however well-motivated) who rush to a disaster-area, frequently seem in competition rather than in collaboration. We have some methods of coordination but we must also fine methods of building partnerships.

Often the community itself is so shell-shocked that it is unable to decide its own priorities and needs. NGOs and international agencywallahs, the Army and the Government, all elbow into this distress, beating their own drum, making discordant, contradictory noises, peddling their own speciality (hand pump versus soya bean!) and obsession. You may think this cynical, but it sometimes seems that their priority is how to most quickly and dramatically spend their own disaster budgets and achieve their own targets. There is little sharing, consultation or collaboration, and the local community is a passive rather than participative beneficiary.

Dr. Sarojini Mahishi, once a minister in Government of Indian spoke at October 1995 workshop on disaster mitigation in Ahmedabad of scientists trying to seed the clouds with rain. When NGOs try to seed the clouds, we must first make sure that our rain falls in the right places.

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South Asian Series on Vulnerability Reduction : No. 3

Reducing vulnerability of a victim or at risk community is now high on the agenda of disaster mitigation efforts, local or regional or international. However, case studies that document local experience are rare, especially from South Asia, a region attracting a widest range of disasters and housing a largest number of victim population in the world. South Asian Series on Vulnerabillity Reduction is jointly launched by Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI) and Duryog Nivaran (DN) to fill this gap. The focus is on publishing fresh, local and exploratory experience from South Asia. Mihir R. Bhatt of Disaster Mitigation Institute and John Twigg of Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) (UK) are the series editors.

Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI) is one of the community-based research, policy analysis, planning and technical assistance organisations. Together with local groups, government agencies,and others, DMI enhances prevention, mitigation,and management of disaster and reorients relief and reconstruction to local initiatives. Turning a disaster into an opportunity for accelerating economic growth or joining the mainstream of development is possible.

Duryog Nivaran is a network of individuals and organisations working in South Asia committed to promoting an alternative perspective on disasters mitigation and vulnerability reduction in the region.