

# Humanity in Calamity

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Calamity is a natural or man-made hazard resulting in an event of substantial extent causing significant physical damage or destruction, loss of life, or drastic change to the environment. A calamity can be defined as any tragic event from events such as earthquakes, floods, accidents, fires, or explosions. It is a phenomenon that can cause damage to life and property and destroy the economic, social and cultural life of people.

In contemporary academia, disasters are seen as the consequence of inappropriately managed risk. These risks are the product of a combination of both hazard/s and vulnerability. Hazards that strike in areas with low vulnerability will never become disasters, as is the case in uninhabited regions.

Developing countries suffer the greatest costs when a disaster hits more than 95 percent of all deaths caused by disasters occur in developing countries, and losses due to natural disasters are 20 times greater in developing countries than in industrialized countries.

Natural Calamity - A natural calamity is a consequence when a natural hazard affects humans or the built environment. Human vulnerability, and lack of appropriate emergency management, leads to financial, environmental, or human impact.

Man made Calamity - Man-made calamities are the consequence of technological or human hazards. Examples include stampedes, fires, transport accidents, industrial accidents, oil spills and nuclear explosions/radiation. War and deliberate attacks may also be put in this category.

A **tsunami** is a series of water waves caused by the displacement of a large volume of a body of water, generally an ocean or a large lake. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and other underwater explosions, landslides, glacier calvings, meteorite impacts and other disturbances above or below water all have the potential to generate a tsunami. 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was among the deadliest natural disasters in human history with over 230,000 people killed in 14 countries bordering the Indian Ocean.

In June 2013, a multi-day cloudburst centered on the North Indian state of **Uttarakhand** caused devastating **floods** and **landslides** in the country's worst natural disaster since the 2004 tsunami. Though some parts of Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh in India, some regions of Western Nepal, and some parts of Western Tibet also experienced heavy rainfall, over 95% of the casualties occurred in Uttarakhand. As of 16 July 2013, according to figures provided by the Uttarakhand government, more than 5,700 people were "presumed dead." This total included 934 local residents.

Uttarakhand is both the new and traditional name of the state that was formed from the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh, India. Uttarakhand was also the ancient Puranic term for the central stretch of the Indian Himalayas. Its peaks and valleys were well known in ancient times as the abode of gods and goddesses and source of the Ganges River. Today, it is often called "the Land of the Gods" (Dev Bhoomi) because of the presence of a multitude of Hindu pilgrimage spots.

According to the 2011 census of India, Uttarakhand has a population of 10,116,752, making it the 19th most populous state in India. A large portion of the population consists of Rajput and Brahmins. More than 88% of the population follow Hinduism, Muslims are the

largest minority in the state with Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, and Jains being the other major religions. Garhwali and Kumaoni are the two main regional languages, whereas Hindi is the most widely spoken language. Uttarakhand is the only state in India with Sanskrit as one of its official languages.

Two of the most important rivers in Hinduism originate in the region, the Ganga at Gangotri and the Yamuna at Yamunotri. These two along with Badrinath and Kedarnath form the Chota Char Dham, a holy pilgrimage for the Hindus. The Valley of Flowers, a Unesco World Heritage Site located here, is known for the variety and rarity of the flowers and plants found there.

Uttarakhand is also well known for the mass agitation of the 1990s that led to the formation of the Chipko environmental movement and other social movements. Though primarily a livelihood movement rather than a forest conservation movement, it went on to become a rallying point for many future environmentalists, environmental protests, and movements the world over and created a precedent for non-violent protest. It stirred up the existing civil society in India, which began to address the issues of tribal and marginalized people.

People of India widely believe that salvation can be achieved only after completing the 'Char Dham Yatra' — journey comprising the four Hindu spiritual pilgrimages – Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri. Every year thousands of people throng these shrines to offer prayers and receive blessings from the holy Ganges. People visit 'Char Dham' and take a dip in the holy waters aspiring to wash away their sins and attain salvation.

But this year destiny had planned something else for these pilgrims. The holy waters turned violent and claimed many lives. A large number of people are still being rescued from the rain-wreaked Kedar Valley and other parts of devastated Uttarakhand. But those who returned not only complained not just about nature's fury, but also about how inhuman people can be.

When a tragedy brings out the best in human beings, it also brings out the worst, otherwise hidden deep in our psyche. The human race that prides itself in being called the supreme species has failed its fellow brethren with its lack of compassion.

The chronicles of the people who survived the tragedy is extremely painful. The stranded people who were successful to fight against the rains found themselves helpless when looted by those who demanded an exorbitant amount for bare necessities like food and water. Some of them who were rescued by the Army had disturbing tales to narrate.

While relief operation is being carried out on war footing in the flood distressed areas and authorities are making all efforts to rush food packets amid reports that hundreds of survivors have gone hungry for days, had the locals shown a little concern there would've been much lesser casualties.

However, there is another side of the story as well. Several locals also played a genuine role in saving lives of pilgrims who are now able to return safely. People from small villages have poured out their bare necessities for the stranded and hungry. Some villagers set up community kitchens to provide food to the scores of those rescued. Not only this, they even vowed to dole out all possible help as long as their reserves last. Surprisingly, the helpers are yet not backing-off even as most of them are now left with no food and may even have to starve once the deluge is over.

Not only that, various groups of youth have setup vigils to protect both the survivors and the departed. NGOs were also making efforts to ensure the safety of ladies.

Amidst all the death and disaster, the Indian Army has also come in for some serious praise for its efforts to rescue the people from the flood ravaged areas of Uttarakhand. People have been saying that the army has given them a second lease of life.

Also the Indian Air Force (IAF) is playing a major role in saving lives by launching rescue operations in Uttarakhand and has made some extraordinary efforts, like the move to

establish "an aviation fuel supply bridge" at Dharasu in Uttarkashi district to hasten rescue operations by helicopters.

The move described as "very innovative, yet daring" act by the IAF officials will allow additional fueling at Dharasu. In an official release issued by the IAF said that the first C130J "Super Hercules" aircraft landed at Dharasu on an airstrip only 1,300 feet long on June, 23 despite inclement weather. Other than India Air Force which is putting its best foot forward to help out the stranded, Other privately owned helicopters have also chipped-in.

The tragedy has also not shaken the powerful survival spirit of humans. The unprecedented disaster that washed away the 'Char Dham' yatra could not shake the faith of many 'sadhus'.

Constructions were coming up recklessly in Uttarakhand in the name of development. With this disaster, nature showed that there is no supreme power than it. The magnitude of misery is a pointer to the fact that man has been playing with nature.

Towns are considered signs of development and prosperity. But little do we realise that these towns are being built after destruction of water bodies, mountains and polluting environment. We cannot squarely blame this tragedy on any particular organization or government because in one day they received 340mm of rain. It was a cloudburst. In the local parlance they said, 'Aasman gir gaya' – the sky fell on them, literally. Cloudbursts, landslips, these are all natural processes in the mountain. It is a tragedy because *we* are in the way. Otherwise it is not a tragedy; it is just a natural process of the mountain growing. What is unstable has to come down and stabilize itself; this is a millions-of-years process, it is happening. So it is not a natural calamity, it is a natural process, but it is a human calamity. How to avoid the human calamity is human business.

Above all, we need to understand that a successful nation is a successful enterprise too. *What is our strength? What is limited with us? Has something not been taken care of?* It is time we look at a nation as an enterprise, and we need somebody who is enterprising enough and

who will handle it as an enterprise to make it successful. The thing is, we get lost in the history, tradition and so many things. We have to value those things, but we have to see them as traditional strengths and traditional weaknesses. We have to look at ourselves as an enterprise and we want to be a successful enterprise, not a flop. Managing our land, our natural resources and our human resources is very much a part of the enterprise.

It is a certain emotion, a human emotion which holds a nation together. Different nations have different ethos. For India, Ganga, Himalayas, these things are very important binding factors. If we destroy these things we will have great difficulty holding this diverse population as a nation after some time. Already it is happening.

So do not look at this as one single tragedy or one incident that once the cameras are off, we will forget about and go about our business. We have to see India as an enterprise and we want a successful enterprise on all levels.

In the same way nature has also proved that tampering with it could be dangerous. But the point to ponder here is — will people and government take lessons from this destruction? It might appear that cloudbursts and torrential rains are the reasons behind the Uttarakhand disaster, but a little fact-finding reveals that this Himalayan tsunami is a manmade disaster. We cut trees indiscriminately but forget to plant one, which in turn reduces the grip on the soil. The Government is also allowing exploitation of areas that are ecologically sensitive for commercial gain not caring for long term implications. For a better future and to maintain the sanctity of nature it depends on us as to how we maintain the ecological balance and keep the earth safe for generations to come.

There are enough studies and data to establish that a disaster such as this is not only man-made but also, by that token, pre-ordained. It is a matter of common sense that if we build on river beds and flood plains, your structures will be washed away when the rains come and the river bed/flood plains fill up with water. That is why even the barely literate, part-time farmers

who reside in, and grow vegetables on, the Yamuna flood plains in Delhi pack their belongings and shift onto higher ground every year just before the monsoon.

It is also a matter of common sense that if you mine river beds for sand and gravel, if we indiscriminately divert forest land for mining, and if de-silting of rivers is not carried out, then you are setting yourself up for extreme soil erosion, landslides, and flash floods of unmanageable magnitude. But sadly enough, it is common in our myopic vision of development to choose short-term “solutions” over long-term sustainability. What passes for development in Uttarakhand is nothing but the material manifestation of the will to power—and pelf—of a shifting consortium of politicians, builders, real estate speculators and sand-mining contractors.

According to media reports, when the floods struck, about 28 million tourists were visiting the state, while the local population is close to half that number. First of all, it is irresponsible to let such a huge volume of human traffic into an ecologically sensitive area, that too in the monsoon season. But once the decision had been taken to milk tourism to the maximum, we would naturally need to build infrastructure to cater to such tourist inflows. This requires planning. And given the fragile nature—of both the climate and eco-systems—of the Himalayan region, it also requires a strict adherence to building and environmental norms. The first principle of disaster management is prevention—by taking the necessary precautionary measures. But Uttarakhand, captive to local interest groups, has been doing the exact opposite: actively soliciting disaster.

As recently as February 2013, the Uttarakhand high court had passed an order asking the state government to demolish structures that had come up within 200 metres of the river banks. But the administration did not act. When the floods came, many of those illegal structures got demolished anyway.

**Water has its own nature. Whenever it'll be placed anywhere, will go down and down, no matter whoever or whatever come in the way.** So when it rained on the peak, water had to come down, but could not follow the paths which were meant for it. Because the depth of the rivers were not enough to pass the water though. Then there was no option left for the water. **So according to its own nature water flooded the area found on its downstream.** Our

mountains were never so fragile. But these heavy machines plying everyday on the kutcha roads have weakened it, and now we suffer landslides more often.

This issue is not with Kedarnath only. Going forward this kind of but small disasters will be seen in all cities. People, basically builders fill the places for water like low lands, ponds, rivers, lakes etc. Unplanned infrastructure is going on and on, just like anything. So these days also, after half an hour rain or an hour rain, it happens that water floods the streets of the cities. Just imagine, in the same situation, if the rain continues for another 1 or 2 hours, then the flood will span into more areas and cover the houses, streets, bus stops, airports and all causing lots of damage. It can be easily observed in all most all cities in India during heavy rain. If we can't take a further step here, then anyone can be a victim in future.

#### End Notes:

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- The Calamity of Disaster – Recognizing the possibilities, planning for the event, managing crisis and coping with the effects.
- Corporate Disaster Resource Network, India – Needs and Offers matched online.