

Disasters and Historic Silence: A Review of the Evidences of Exploitation in Folk Culture of Colonial India

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Abstract

The present paper is based on various literature available on the issues related to disasters in India during the colonial administration. The history of disaster provides ample evidence of a chronological overview of hazards during a disaster and human exploitations during and post-disaster situations. The disaster is perceived as a popular culture or folk culture of a nation's history and its society. The development process in India has been displayed through an evolutionary process from barbarism to civilized society. The study of disaster is included in the domain of culture and tradition where the disaster vulnerability is either erased or the data is manipulated. While studying the causes of disasters, many a time the roles of popular culture, power, and social structure are taken into account to justify the disasters. The sociologists, in the broader context, highlighted that individuals are often influenced by the physical and cultural context in which they live and become part of disaster situations. The study of popular culture often depicts the cultural practices towards exploitation of weaker sections of the society including women and peasants in colonial India. Studies of such experiences help contemporary researchers in redesigning strategies to meet the challenges arising from disasters including wars, pandemics, deaths, poverty, and others.

Keywords: Disaster, Popular Culture, Development Challenges, Human Exploitations.

1. Introduction:

Disasters show up in the records of history and in important historical events, but writing about and making sense of these events is naturally complicated and multilayered. Like other events, disasters have a complex history that requires the use of multiple sources, such as natural records and written accounts by people, to successfully document them. As a result of their schooling, historians tend to trust the more recent sources, which got a lot better in both number and reliability during the nineteenth century. The development of tools, especially in the 20th century, has made it easier to record risks and disasters in a scientific way. Even though record-keeping has gotten better, writing about disasters and their history stories is still a difficult job (Aguilar et al., 2016).

Disasters do not transpire in isolation. The impact of disasters varies across individuals due to their unique vulnerabilities. The various vulnerabilities are influenced by prevailing socio-economic situations characterised by discrimination. Disasters arise as a consequence of the confluence of natural hazards and human vulnerability. The vulnerabilities manifest in the form of physical exposure, socioeconomic fragility, and constrained capacity to mitigate vulnerability and catastrophe risk. The

ability to mitigate vulnerabilities and dangers is influenced by a multifaceted combination of elements, including poverty, social class, age group, ethnicity, and gender dynamics. The socially created roles assigned to women render them more susceptible to the impacts of calamities (Dutta, 2017).

India is often ranked as one of the nations with the highest risk of natural disasters. When India was under British administration, there was an increase in the frequency and severity of natural disasters. Natural catastrophes include calamities such as droughts, floods, pandemics, landslides, and cyclones, amongst others. The majority of natural catastrophes were responsible for an increase in criminal activity, such as robbery, rape, human trafficking, organ trafficking, human rights abuses, poverty, starvation, the dowry system, unemployment, farmer suicides, child labour, and other forms of abuse.

1.1. What is a disaster:

According to IFRC¹, “Disasters are serious disruptions to the functioning of a community that exceeds its capacity to cope using its own resources. Disasters can be caused by natural, man-made and technological hazards, as well as various factors that influence the exposure and vulnerability of a community.”

According to The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, “A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts.”

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, “an event causing great harm, damage, or suffering.”

Disasters are of three types the first one is Natural Disasters and the second one is Man-made Disasters and the third one Silent disaster.

Natural Disaster:

Natural hazards include a range of severe and catastrophic weather and climatic occurrences. While dangers may be found in many locales around the globe, particular areas exhibit higher vulnerability to certain types of hazards compared to others. Disasters arise from the transformation of natural dangers into events that result in the destruction of human lives and the disruption of livelihoods (World Meteorological Organization, n.d.). Natural Hazards are considered as the act of God. Examples of natural hazards are floods, volcanos, cyclones, earthquakes etc.

Man-made Disaster:

Man-made catastrophes are characterised by the presence of human purpose, neglect, or mistake, which contribute to the breakdown of a man-made system. This is in contrast to natural disasters, which arise from natural dangers. Various examples of man-made catastrophes include criminal activities, such as arson and civil commotion, as well as acts of terrorism, warfare, biological or chemical threats, and cyber-attacks, among others. (Emergency Management Monroe County, FL, n.d.).

Silent Disaster:

Even with all the news from all over the world, there are still things that happen every day that don't get covered or don't get enough attention. Some of these things, like famines and disease attacks, are very bad. This situation is called a silent disaster (Global Administrator, 2016). Examples of silent disasters are child missing, corruption, human trafficking, dowry, farmer suicide, Unemployment and so on.

¹ The International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) is recognised as the greatest global humanitarian network, consisting of 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Its primary objectives include the preservation of human life, the enhancement of community resilience, the promotion of localization efforts, and the advancement of human dignity on a global scale.

There is no “natural” process that may lead to the occurrence of a disaster. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, cyclones, floods, and other natural disasters are examples of dangers that could occur. Human activity is also a contributing element in the occurrence of the catastrophe, though, thus it is important to note these factors. We are powerless to prevent a volcano from erupting; nevertheless, we can prevent a volcanic eruption from becoming a catastrophe. When we recognize that a “natural hazard” is not the same thing as a “disaster,” we can see that the latter is nearly always caused by people and is increasingly ignited by human acts such as railway accidents, deforestation, fast urbanisation, environmental degradation, climate change, and so on. When we realise this, we can see that a “disaster” is almost always caused by humans and is increasingly sparked by human actions. (Leoni et al., 2011).

2. Disasters as a Popular Culture or Folk Culture in India:

During the first years of the nineteenth century in colonial Indian culture, the literary work titled “Six Acres and a Third” narrates a story centred on themes of riches, greed, property, and thievery. At its core, this narrative revolves around the malevolent actions of Ramachandra Mangaraj, a landowner who takes advantage of impoverished peasants and manipulates the recently established legal framework to wrongfully seize the assets of others. However, it should be noted that this particular issue is only one of many explored within the work. As the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that there are other levels of significance and consequences to be uncovered (Senapati, 2005).

The dowry system in marriage is the cultural practice that is considered to contribute the most towards the exploitation of human beings in Indian culture. In India, the term "dowry" refers to the consumable items, cash, and real or movable property that the bride's family provides to the groom, his parents, and his relatives as a condition of the marriage. This "dowry" is a part of the "dowry system," which is a cultural practice that has been practiced for centuries. In Hindi, it is referred to as dahez, whereas in Urdu, it is referred to as jahez.

According to the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, dowry is defined as the provision of any property or valuable security, whether given directly or indirectly, in the context of marriage. This provision can be made by one party to the other party in the marriage, or by the parents of either party or by any other individual to either party or to any other person involved in the marriage. The provision may occur prior to, during, or after the marriage, and is intended as a consideration for the marriage itself. However, it is important to note that the definition of dowry does not encompass dower or mahr in cases where the Muslim Personal law is applicable.

During the period spanning from 2017 to 2021, the state of Uttar Pradesh had an average of six dowry-related fatalities every day. Extrapolating from this data, it can be estimated that the whole nation experienced around 20 dowry-related deaths on a daily basis during the same time frame. Between the years 2017 and 2021, the nation saw an average of almost 20 cases of dowry-related deaths on a daily basis. Notably, the state of Uttar Pradesh exhibited the greatest incidence, with an average of six such fatalities occurring each day. 35,493 cases of dowry deaths were recorded in India over the period from 2017 to 2021. The respondent provided data on dowry fatalities, stating that there were 7,466 cases recorded in 2017, followed by 7,167 cases in 2018, 7,141 cases in 2019, 6,966 cases in 2020, and 6,753 cases in 2021, in response to a written inquiry. In the span of five years, Uttar Pradesh recorded the largest number of dowry fatalities, amounting to 11,874 cases. This figure translates to an average of around six deaths per day. During the period from 2017 to 2021, Bihar recorded a total of 5,354 cases of

dowry deaths, while Madhya Pradesh reported 2,859 cases, West Bengal reported 2,389 cases, and Rajasthan reported 2,244 cases (“Dowry Deaths Reported Between 2017-21; 20 Deaths Daily,” 2022). The heinous practice of going on witch hunts is just another horrible way that human beings are used for one's own gain. Even though it is more common in tribal cultures, witch-hunting may also be found in non-tribal societies and occurs in certain of communities. In spite of the fact that women make up the vast majority of victims, males who are victims' relatives or family members are also hurt or murdered in these attacks. The vast majority of these assaults are carried out against socially disadvantaged groups, such as Adivasis and Dalits (Sharma, 2022).

In Colonial India throughout the 19th century, there were numerous occurrences of witch hunts that were documented, and authorities thought that during this time period, over a thousand women were murdered on the grounds of witchcraft in India's central plains alone. It was also claimed that more women were put to death for being witches than were put to death as a result of the practice of Sati² (Yadav, 2020).

The great majority of people who are killed during witch hunts are women, particularly elderly women who live alone and are members of a lower caste. These women are socially disadvantaged as a result of their backgrounds, and as a result, they are more likely to be blamed for the problems that occur in their communities when they are targeted as scapegoats. Although it is far less often, males may also be accused of practicing witchcraft, particularly if they are related to or members of the same family as the person who is being accused of practicing witchcraft (Sharma, 2022).

According to the most recent National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics, 15 women were killed in 2020 on suspicion of witchcraft. Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha all states with a sizable Adivasi population recorded 88 witch-hunting-related killings. On top of the list of states in which women are persecuted, subjected to abuse, and even put to death on the basis of accusations that they are witches is the state of Jharkhand. Despite the fact that it is one of the most impoverished states in India (Sharma, 2022).

3. Human exploitations during and post-disaster:

Natural calamities can't be stopped. It is beyond the human hand but how the natural calamities convert into man-made disasters? Let us take the example of famine. Famines were a recurrent phenomenon in South Asia before to 1900 and were often characterised by their profound and far-reaching consequences. The occurrence of a sequence of famines throughout the nineteenth century was instigated by the loss of harvests. The convergence of food acquisition efforts during World War II, coupled with agricultural setbacks, precipitated the most severe famine of the twentieth century, often referred to as the 1943 Bengal famine. Famine-like circumstances reoccurred in the years 1966 and 1972; however, the magnitude of mortality resulting from famine was constrained during both instances (Roy, 2016).

The idea that women died at a lower rate than males during famines because they could readily adjust to food shortages and were reportedly less susceptible to infectious illnesses is demolished by the research conducted on the Orissa Famine of 1866. The myth was supported by colonial administrators who believed that women died at a lower rate than men during famines. Increasing male migration, most of

² The practice of Sati, also known as suttee, refers to a historical tradition in which a widow immolates herself by voluntarily sitting on the funeral pyre of her departed spouse.

which led to significant mortality, explains the shift in sex ratio that occurred throughout the colonial era, according to evidence based on historical, social, and biological variables (Mohanty, 2022).

Famines are indicative of the occurrence of hunger, while the reverse relationship does not hold true. The condition of starvation is indicative of poverty, but, it does not always imply the reverse relationship. It is now imperative for us to transition from the broad concept of poverty to the catastrophic occurrence of famines. Poverty may manifest as a state of relative deprivation rather than total expropriation. Poverty may manifest as a severe condition, devoid of significant instances of famine. Starving, however, does indeed indicate a state of poverty, since the complete lack of resources and hardship associated with starving is enough evidence to classify it as poverty, regardless of the perspective of relative deprivation. Hunger is a prevalent occurrence in several regions around the globe; nevertheless, it is crucial to differentiate this recurring state of hunger from the more acute and severe episodes of famines. In 436 BC, there were instances of severe famine observed in Rome, where a significant number of starving individuals resorted to desperate measures such as throwing themselves into the Tiber River. Similarly, in AD 918, the region of Kashmir experienced a devastating famine, resulting in the distressing sight of the Vitasta River (also known as Jhelum) being completely covered with corpses. Another notable occurrence took place in China between 1333 and 1337, where an estimated four million deaths were recorded in a specific region alone. In 1770, India faced a severe famine that led to an approximate death toll of ten million individuals, according to the most reliable estimates available. Lastly, during the period of 1845-1851, Ireland was struck by the potato famine, which claimed the lives of approximately one-fifth of the entire Irish population and prompted a significant wave of emigration (Sen, 1981).

The historical record of famines and chronic hunger is replete with accounts that evoke strong emotional reactions due to their depiction of indifference and malicious intent. In this context, the term "starvation" is used in a broader scope to include anyone experiencing insufficient access to nourishment, while "famine" represents an exceptionally severe expression of this phenomenon, resulting in widespread mortality (Sen, 1981).

During a disaster or post-disaster, it is often noticed that when law and order are working to mitigate the disaster the most crime is done human trafficking. Human trafficking is often made worse by the absence of legal aid services that are accessible to victims and by the lack of understanding about the existing legal protection that is accessible to victims of trafficking. It is common for victims and witnesses of human trafficking to be unaware of the tools that are available to achieve justice and reparation for their experiences. On the other hand, there is a possibility that law enforcement officers and judicial institutions may not have the resources and expertise to provide complete protection for victims. The problems of human trafficking and forced relocation brought on by natural catastrophes are intricately connected to one another. The vast amounts of human trafficking that occur as a direct consequence of natural disasters are generated by the displacement that these catastrophes induce. According to estimates provided by the World Health Organisation (WHO), women and children are disproportionately impacted by natural disasters (Dutta, 2017).

Efforts are also underway to formulate comprehensive legislation pertaining to disaster response that specifically tackles the issue of trafficking in the context of such calamities. The Disaster Management Act of 2005 in India does not include provisions pertaining to the specific requirements of women nor does it adequately address the issue of trafficking in the context of disasters. An earnest disaster legislation should seek to address the issue of trafficking and strive for its effective management. In the

event of catastrophes, it is incumbent upon the State to fulfill its affirmative obligation to safeguard its population against such occurrences, as well as during the duration of and in the aftermath of those disasters. Hence, a fundamental entitlement to protection from calamities is provided to the populace. The current study centres on the issue of trafficking, suggesting that the scope of the disaster response law might be extended to include anti-trafficking legislation and recommendations pertaining to displaced individuals. This expansion aims to provide a robust protective framework against traffickers, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the response to such crises (Dutta, 2017).

Conclusion:

The topic of culture and custom, which includes the study of disaster, is one in which the possibility of a disaster occurring is either eliminated or the data is transformed. As can be seen, the dowry system is used in the majority of Indian weddings. The reason for this may be found in the folk culture of the many Indian cultures. It is an unnoticed disaster. A lot of the time, the families of girls have to borrow all they own only to have the girl child married, and as a result, families will opt for an abortion to avoid the financial burden of doing so. People in India continue to engage in the activity despite the fact that it is illegal.

It is a superstitious practice, yet throughout history, people have resorted to hunting witches in order to limit women's rights, quiet them, prevent them from inheriting property, take their land, or just get them out of the way if they are a bother. Greed, power, tribal politics, a lack of fundamental social benefits, most crucially healthcare, and a lack of education have all created favourable conditions for the practice to flourish, focusing on women who are seen as vulnerable, mostly unmarried, and older.

The marginalised and disadvantaged populations often end up being the most severely impacted by natural calamities; the repercussions of natural disasters are also influenced by social inequities and geographical disparities. Natural disasters do not affect everyone in the same way. One of the most pressing concerns in emergency response and management is how marginalised groups should be included. The definitions of catastrophes that are used by specialists and those who decide policy might be quite different from those used by the poor.

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