

# TOWARDS THE TRENDS AND HORIZONS OF DISASTER AND ANTHROPOLOGY: A BRIEF OUTLINE

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## Abstract

Through this attempt, the author tries to amalgamate the multiple research works on disaster and the multifocal dimensions to provide an outline to the interested beginners to this vast and rich interdisciplinary field of disaster studies. The expectation of the current effort is to convey the messages about the trends and horizons of disaster studies from anthropological stance. Beside this optimism of the author, another shadow is there, because of the oversimplification of the approaches related to disaster studies and practices for the convenience of understanding of the expected readers of this article that further promote an opportunity to the author to create interests among the upcoming researchers of this field with an alternative views and opinions further expansion of this significant applied field.

**Keywords:** *Disaster, Anthropology, Historicity, vulnerability*

The term, “Disaster” reflects a dualism that - it may be defined as a concept and an area of study, though there is an inevitable overlap between these two approaches (Perry, 2007). The definitional debate regarding disaster is significant due to the appearances of new form of hazard and the rapidly changing human environmental relations and conditions (Oliver-Smith, 1996), thus, leading multiple meanings to the researchers of the concerned disciplines (Mustafa, 2005).

Any government organization develops “mandated” definitions of disaster to indicate and determine the boundaries of emergency management and response (Buckle, 2005), the emergency managers hold a specific view on what constitutes a disaster (Britton, 1986), whereas the social scientists perceive disaster as a situation or an event, which offers a temporary or permanent threat to the social order or to a given normative social system (Wallace, 1956; Fritz, 1961; Stallings, 1998).

Alexander (2005) considers Anthropology, Sociology and Social Psychology as three of the seven major disciplinary expertises on disasters research. The disaster research, as a social field, was primarily constituted by the sociologists (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 1999), though Barton (2005) begins his paper “Disaster and Collective Stress” with the note that the National Academy division of U.S.A. on disaster was of Anthropology and Psychology; Sociology was absent. Contemporary sociological understanding shows

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that the meaning of disaster is socially constructed and disaster is clearly a social issue as opposed to the term, 'hazard', a natural agency like- flood, famine, earthquake etc.(Quarantelli, 2005).

Anthropological studies on disasters were initiated in almost 1950s (Drabek, 1986). The discipline possesses a long tradition of studying the adaptive strategies of the societies in stressful and hazardous environments (Torry, 1979), traditionally known as 'Anthropology of Suffering' (Davis, 1992). The source of hazard(s) is not necessarily present in the natural environment; rather they are controlled by the social, economic and political forces to a given context (Vayda and McKay, 1975).

The studies on adaptive strategies lead the question of adaptation to hazard and disasters is paralleled by a similar concern about the long term sustainability of resource(s) use along with present levels of environmental degradation and pollution (Oliver-Smith, 1999). However, the studies on adaptive strategies guided a new pathway to anthropological research regarding disaster. The new trend showed that any disaster involves loss of property and means of livelihood, calls for a change in the modes of subsistence and the social organization that regulates them (Firth, 1959).

The era reflects an idea that disaster as a social phenomenon disrupts and constitutes cultural meaning(s) to a given cultural milieu. The transformation of cultural meaning(s) due to disaster as a central meaning shifted the focus of contemporary anthropological research to the study of the crisis and everyday life (Winchester, 1981). Individual's social position and response are taken into account as the unit of study of disasters like wars and famine (Moser, 1989). The contemporary disaster researches in anthropology focuses on the concept of vulnerability in terms of the social, economic and political conditions which differently affects individuals and groups, as well as the overall capacity of the community to absorb shock and recover (O'Keefe, Westgate and Wisner, 1976). From the mentioned context, it is clear that the 'shock' related to a disaster and its system of recovery, needs an interdisciplinary attention. There have been many research efforts of using social psychological theories to unify and expand current conceptions of access in ethnographic research-the process by which researchers gather data via interpersonal relationships with participants/informants (Harrington, 2003).

Oliver-Smith in 1996 categorized three fundamental theoretical approaches to study disaster from anthropological perspectives- a) Behavioural Response Approach that deals with the aspects of human subjective and/or group behaviour at the time of the disaster and its post period, b) A Social Change Approach that emphasises the restricting of social structures and systems at the eve of post disaster period, and c) Political Economic/Environmental Approach, associated with the study and analysis of ongoing creation of social vulnerabilities in respect to human environmental relations. Contrastingly, Fjord and Manderson (2009) suggested a couple of stance to analyse the disability in the context of disaster that are a) the subjective sensory, mental, physical, intellectual and emotional responses and its natural outcome that restructures the disability with a deep analytical view of cultural mechanism of coping strategies to given

hazard, and b) to analyse the 'special needs' that allows to understand the scope of designing and recreating an organizational approach to rebuilt social environment for the sake of human sustainable survival livelihood.

A number of researchers have begun to recognize the increasing importance of broader anthropological and social psychological issues in the study of humans in extreme environments (Johnson and Finney, 1986; Harrison and Connors, 1984; Pierce 1985). In addition, the social- psychological issues of reactions (like- fear, anxiety, anger, impatience, irritability, grief, shame, guilt, stress, and trauma) to disasters and mechanisms of resilience may be an effective means for contemporary anthropological researches, theory building and policy making on well-being.

Addressing Wallace, Firth, Oliver-Smith and Hoffman as the founder a pioneer research personnel, Fass and Barrios (2015) calls for more specific, in-depth and 'culturally sensitive recovery and mitigation' ethnographic approach that might be possible and meaningful way out for upcoming anthropological researcher to expose the issues like vulnerability, disability, risks, hazards, recovery, and above all better and sustainable policies and actions.

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