

## Challenges and Barriers of Humanitarian Aid after YAAS: A Qualitative Post-Disaster Study in West Bengal

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### Abstract:

*The severe cyclone 'YAAS' affected a large part of West Bengal on 26 May 2021. More than 4,500 villages were damaged. People have lost their houses, bedding, cattle, stored food, and other important belongings due to 'YAAS' cyclone led by flood. The basic needs like drinking water, sanitation and other like also became hard to get. Their land has become saline and not cultivable for next three to four years. Fishes of their pond died for the same reason. In this crisis situation providing humanitarian aid and managing donations among the affected people look as the most important problem after disaster. The aim of this study is to explore the challenges and barriers of humanitarian aid management for the disaster happened by 'YAAS' cyclone in West Bengal. It has also tried to find out the relation between social capital and disaster. For this purpose, this qualitative study has used participant observation as the prime tool for data collection. Researchers have visited three places of West Bengal, these are Jhikurkhali of Haldia (Purba Medinipur), Pakhirala of Sagar Island and Baliara of Mousuni Island (South 24 Parganas). The experiences are analysed in interpretative way. Community involvement and collaboration are two essential parts for successful disaster management. In West Bengal, the impact of lockdown for COVID 19 pandemic and the result of last assembly election made a great impression in disaster management after 'YAAS'. Study has observed the humanitarian agencies or the NGOs who have managed an amount of aid for the disaster area, faced barrier to distribute the resources due to lockdown, huge transportation cost and time. Moreover, the interference of local political parties and the local leaders made an enormous delinquent for the disbars of the resources. Even unprompted instinctive community involvement became hampering due to this local political tension. It has been also observed tourist trespass in the name of relief work (relief tourism) is creating another problem in this pandemic situation. This restricts free movement of the humanitarian aid agencies or the NGOs to confer relief. On the other hand, lack of donors' trust in private humanitarian agencies, NGOs or GOs is another barrier for accumulating donations. People have trust more on known face or identified individuals than officials. These barriers could be improved by developing public education as well as by the intervention of Government and Policy makers for the welfare of community.*

Key words- Humanitarian aid, social capital, post-disaster, disaster management

## Introduction

Natural disaster like earthquakes, floods, droughts, and cyclones have become increasingly destructive in India. The coastal regions are getting affected by the cyclone or flood in many times. Consequently, the people who used to live in or near the coastline areas are at risk predominantly due to their proximity to this natural hazard (Faas, 2016). Aftermath of the natural disaster led to a scarcity of resources like massive loss of life, no shelter, diminution of food and water, devastation of any type of communication, loss of electricity and loss of domestic livestock. People hardened to go through the many challenges like social, psychological, material, and political regarding the sustaining of life after natural disaster shock. They immediately need humanitarian assistance for “saving life, alleviating suffering and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of emergencies” (OECD, 2012). This short-term relief is very imperative for overcoming the circumstances after the disaster. People did not get humanitarian support in a proper way due to the different obstacles. In this context, researchers have tried to explore the experience of challenges and barriers for providing humanitarian aid after YAAS cyclone in the coastal areas of West Bengal on and after May 26, 2021. In the crisis situation providing aid and managing donation looks to be the most important task (Safarpour et. al., 2020; Varella & Gonçalves, 2016). Beside Government organizations, different NGOs and humanitarian agencies usually organize aid to the disaster struck areas (Ismail, Majid & Roosli, 2014). The circulation of the resources creates many challenges such as time, cost, coverage, and eligibility (Ferrer et. al., 2018). At that moment, community involvement and collaboration are two essential parts for successful disaster management (Jahangiri, Izadkhah & Jamaledin, 2011). Social capital has also played a significant role in this regard.

The social capital (which is known as internal factors) is vital to determine processes and outcomes after a disaster (Berkes, 2007; Turner, 2010; Maru et al., 2014; Cutter et al., 2014). This broadly refers to a group or an actor's capability to exercise and utilise different kind of resources through social relations (networking), shared norms and mutual trust (Coleman, 1988; Krishna, 2002), and has been viewed by many as a key factor of disaster management and coping up strategy that very much dependent on individuals' capacities (Munasinghe 2007; Aldrich 2010; Aldrich 2011). Thus, social network, trust, cooperative and coordination behaviour, shared understanding and norms play effective role for recovering disaster hazards immediately (Cohen & Prusak, 2002; R. Putnam, 1993; Schuller, Baron, & Field, 2000). Three types of social capital i.e., bonding (networking among the similar members who are

shared same demographic, social or ethnic status and known to each other) [Putnam, 2000], bridging (networking among the dissimilar members who are not shared same demographic, social or ethnic status) [Szreter & Woolcock, 2004] and linking (individual build such relationship which provides access and connection to power structure and institutions) [Hawkins & Maurer, 2009] have equal impact on disaster resilience. For a smooth response and recovery aftermath of the disaster, community's local network, labour, arrangement of goods and other forms of assistance are important. When researchers visited different places of West Bengal affected by 'YAAS' cyclone, they have experienced how much social networking or capital is crucial for overcoming post disaster situation. Thus, researchers have focused to explore the relation between social capital and post disaster.

### Objectives

- a) To explore the challenges and barriers of humanitarian aid management for the disaster caused by YAAS cyclone in West Bengal.
- b) To find out the relation between social capital and post disaster.

### Methodology

This qualitative study is mainly based on researchers' experience. It has used participant observation as a prime tool for data collection and also has adapted semi structured interview and group discussion method. The experiences which have been explored by using triangulation (involving participant observation, individual interviews and group discussion) were verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the scenario has come out based on the contributions of a range of people and subjective understanding (Shenton, 2004). Patton (1990) recommended that "validity, meaningfulness and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size" (p. 185). This study has collected data from 30 participants, 8 from Sagar Island (South 24 Parganas), 12 from Jhikurkhali (Purba Medinipur) and 10 from Mousuni Island (South 24 Parganas). The best and most popular method for ensuring validity<sup>1</sup> of a qualitative study is the participant observation as it provides the researchers a better understanding of the context and phenomenon under study in a natural setting (DeWalt & DeWalt 2002). Systematic description of source data by means of "thick descriptions" has developed transferability or external

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<sup>1</sup>Validity is a term typically associated with quantitative research; however, when viewed in terms of its meaning of reflecting what is purported to be measured/observed, its use is appropriate. Validity in this instance may refer to context validity, face validity or trustworthiness as described by Lincoln and Guba (1994).

validity of this study. This may also ensure the dependability or reliability of the qualitative data (Smith & Osborn, 2010). Since this research is mostly dependent on researchers' experience, this is significant to say in this context that both the researchers are the members of an NGO (non-profit) named 'Howrah Ramkrishnapur Rubi Society for Human Welfare (HRRSHW), located in district Howrah, Ramkrishnapur area. After the cyclone YAAS, few students of Haldia Government College who are the residents of Sagar Island and Mousuni Island of South 24 Parganas, contacted the first author for relief drive in those areas. So naturally the NGO has taken initiative to do that, then and there. On the other hand, as the first author is a teacher of Haldia Government College, she got information that Jhikurkhali area of Haldia was badly affected by the cyclone YAAS led by flood. Hence after a meeting HRRSHW had decided to provide humanitarian aid in those areas. Data have been collected from 28 May 2021 to 06 June 2021. This is the limitation of this study that due to short period of time it was not possible to reach more participants or visit them frequently due to ongoing COVID-19 lockdown. The experience that the researchers have gone through was analysed in an interpretative way.

### **Findings and Discussion**

While the members of the NGO Howrah Ramkrishnapur Rubi Society for Human Welfare (HRRSHW) had decided to drive relief in those places the first problem, that they faced is transportation. Initially the members of the NGO HRRSHW kept getting frustrated in arranging for vehicles, due to ongoing covid-19 lockdown throughout the state West Bengal. They had had to offer double rent for cars and drivers. Without interference of local political leader, it was quite impossible for them to manage for the police permission for the vehicle, to go for relief work though HRRSHW members had assured they will maintain all the covid-19 protocols provided by WHO (World Health Organization).

On that very day of relief work at Sagar Island we halted at Kakdwip Bazar (South 24 Parganas) to purchase the relief goods but needless to say, the price of all the items were much higher than at other times, even the boat fare and the van fare were very high. A lot of extra money was invested for transportation due to lockdown that could be used to give aid to some more people. The members of HRRSHW had to spend a lot of time arranging for those things due to the lockdown situation. So, cost and time are the two notable barriers for relief work at this moment in post disaster situation.

Second problem that they faced is interference of local political leaders. In this context a good example can be given by sharing Haldia's case. Since the members of HRRSHW had no network in Jhikurkhali, a place in Haldia, the primary problem they faced while they were piloting that place, local people started enquiring which political party they belonged, whether it is saffron or red or green? When the members of HRRSHW said they don't have any colour, the local busy bodies purposively scolded "they must be from opponent party" and also said if the members of HRRSHW want to provide ration to the sufferers then they have to take the permission of their local leader. But unfortunately, he was not present there on that day. So, they took phone number of HRRSHW and the NGO received a call from them after 2 days. They had asked to drive that relief in a joint manner. There is no doubt that in this way these limited statutory power holding leaders would grab the opportunity for free publicity (Mcnamara, et. al., 2015). HRRSHW members said no to them, then and there. After few days incidentally a student of Haldia came forward to help HRRSHW for organizing relief work. His brother-in-law was a very influential person of that area. He helped in delivering food packets to the people of Jhikurkhali and had arranged token numbers for those affected families.

The wired thing what has been realised at Haldia, among them everyone is not severely affected by this YAAS cyclone. Obviously, it was understood they are needy but not all of them had lost everything by the cyclone, even many of them do not live in the river bank of Hoogly. It has been observed whose social networking is very strong having been successful to manage relief token numbers of HRRSHW. So, there is no doubt bonding (social capital) is playing a vital role in post disaster situation within a community where members are more or less holding same economic or social status. Researchers interviewed that student and a few other young local youths of that locality and came to know the embezzlement of the large amount of disaster relief and rehabilitation resources channelling to the less affected households by the local power holders. So social capital obviously matters in post-disaster context.

Another problem is the free movement of some tourists in the name of relief work which turn this as "relief tourism". It has been noticed a group of people consisting of more than 40 members in a picnic mood, carrying some relief items and were going towards the destination. Some were carrying used clothes for the villagers which are very risky in this COVID-19 situation for contamination. Some of them were giving medicines of diarrhoea or

cough and cold for free but the point is villagers have no idea about the dosage of the medicines. Without consultation of a doctor this kind of things are very unethical and risky to be given. Some of them were carrying ration for handful families and they were scattering in that place to enjoy the natural beauty of the area. In an interview at Mousuni Island it has been said that one day 70 people reached there with only 17 kgs of relief ration and two or three of them were engaged in distributing rations while the rest spread in the sea beach with their cameras and liquor bottles. The biggest backdrop that has been observed in maximum villages is the lost use of masks so outsiders might carry virus which might affect them. By this continuous movement of relief tourist, it was soon decided by the government that any group providing aid would be able to enter the YAAS affected areas only by the permission of the local police by submitting relief drive details. A group of more than six people (for providing ration to 100 families) or ten people (for providing ration to 200 families) are not allowed to get in the boat (medium or large size) carrying rations for affected families. As a result, there is a lack of work power those who are carrying rations for 200 to 300 families or more. On the other hand, standing in the permission line at the police station and then travelling so far to reach the destination are becoming immeasurable. It is very important to mention here that those groups who have a connection with local political power holders may manage to go there with much more than 10 people and sometimes it is 25 to 30 at a time. Succumbing to our observation, it is bridging between those who are not similar in socio-economic condition or in ethnicity but there is a mutual trust that any of them will not harm each other (Woolcock, 2001; Paraskevopoulos, 2010). The feeling of gratefulness growing from getting unreciprocated help usually makes a bridge between relief provider and taker (Cheung & Chan, 2010). So, social capital is important in every step of post disaster situation.

Snatching of relief stuff is another serious problem in this situation. Since there are many humanitarian aid agencies or NGOs whom have to travel long for relief work, there is high chance to rob the materials before reaching the place. After loading the ration in a van or a car the NGO members have to keep an eye on those goods all the while. Even a number of robbing incidents have come up in the interviews of the villagers. While police have decided to give permission a few members from agencies or organizations for distributing relief, the chances of snatching increases and as a result, the members of the NGOs always remain fearful and careful for their relief work.

The other area for the relief agencies is accumulating donation particularly for the domestic small-scale NGOs that are running mainly by individual funds. If the members are elite persons having either any form of capital like cultural, economic or social capital, could easily be able to arrange fund for relief drive. Mainly social capital matters more, for the accumulation of individual donations. People believe or trust in known people than on any official bodies. We found in that situation collaboration is the most important factor in managing donations. A joint collaborative venture can overcome the funding issues to some extent. But this jointly venture can only possible through social linking. Linking with other NGO or agency who can provide resources play a crucial role for making association with power structure to develop new ideas and ventures (Hawkins & Maurer, 2009).

### Conclusion

The impacts of lockdown for COVID 19 pandemic have a great impression in disaster management after 'YAAS'. The result of last assembly election and the political tensions in some areas made difficulties in relief work. Community involvement became hampering due to the interference of local leaders. Social Capital is found always an important factor in post disaster context (Adger, 2009; Lalone, 2012; Patterson, Weil & Patel, 2010). This research has observed the three forms of social capital i.e. bonding, bridging and linking is functioning for disaster resilience. Community-based management in an emergency recommends strong social capital which actually offer healthier probabilities of constructed resilience (Murphy, 2011). From arrangement of donation to provide relief all the steps are associated with the possession of social capital of the individuals or the agencies. The barriers could be improved by developing public education as well as by the intervention of Government and Policy makers for the welfare of community.

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