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Is Disaster a Natural Phenomenon? The Case of Sri Lanka

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Abstract:

This article is about the analytical discourse of understanding disaster which is generally known as a situation or an environment where social order and people's safety are disturbed, causing both physical and social impacts in a large scale, nationally or internationally. It may or not involve with a natural phenomenon. However, disaster goes far beyond a physical/material devastation, resulting human suffer, death, destruction and its consequent social impacts on both people and the state. Also, it brings an argument of how one disaster becomes causes of another and its impacts on society on one hand and on the other, disaster may bring a social modification. This line of thoughts goes with situations of Sri Lanka which have faced multi-layers of disaster – tsunami and conflict.

Key words: Disaster, natural, man-made, physical/material and social impacts, responses

'Disaster' is not a new term in any society. When a person is simply asked what a 'disaster' is, the first thing that comes to mind is an unexpected event or a very bad situation (such as an accident, earthquake, flood, tsunami, etc. that can be resulted by impacts of natural or human-induced hazards) that causes problems or a lot of damage and casualties to a society and its population. Before the onset, a community may be aware of disasters that could occur or they may not at all. If aware, the disaster occurs when its catastrophic forces exceed the communities' ability to cope with it. Disasters hamper normal continuation of existing everyday routines of that society. In response to any type of disaster, people and state authorities of an affected society make efforts of preventing further damage, restoring normalcy, establishing relief actions, and forming preventive policy and strategy for any possible future disaster. Immediate courses of action and efforts which are usually unplanned or did not exist before are often undertaken as a sudden response during such emergency situations. However, the response to disaster does not only require response in the short term, but also long term efforts which again need a well-studied and planned process (Quarantelli (ed), 1998, p.67). Sometimes, when both physical-social losses and disruption due to disaster exceed the ability of the affected society to cope on their own resources, external assistance becomes significant.

Besides, the vulnerability to these hazards (of disasters) is again closely linked with the social and economic position of society. It means that if a society is socially and economically poor, their capacity and resources to prevent or cope with disaster is automatically reduced and they are more vulnerable due to their poor conditions of living. Thus, disaster in a particular society is not necessarily similar with that in another society. Rather, magnitude and enormity of a disaster is closely linked with societal background and structures existing prior to the disaster, which is equally important during and after the outbreak of the event. And, the degree of seriousness and the capturing of public attention about such kinds of situation depend on societal and state's declaration that the disaster is happened, and their efforts to highlight the situation before other states or international communities and spectators.

As each society is unique in nature, each disaster can be considered as distinctive from others. Although the central issue is on the ideas of disaster, its main focus is to bring these lines of thought parallel to the situation of Sri Lanka where there are multi-layered disasters – mainly by wars or conflicts and the Tsunami of 2004.

1. Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a single nation-state under the democratic form of government. However, due to differences among the interests of communities – particularly Sinhala, Tamil and Muslims, there have been many periodic wars or conflicts among them. However, conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) which is predominantly ruled by Sinhala and the separatist movement of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has proven the greatest threat to the civilian population of Sri Lanka, particularly in the northern and eastern regions of the country. Consequently, people in the mentioned areas are affected the most (Silva, 2009, p.65). Members of all three major ethnic groups in the country – Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim – have been displaced. Socio-economic spheres and public infrastructures have been paralysed. Insecurity, killing, sudden disappearance and damage become normal in people's lives. Such situation leads to many changes and transformation – socially, psychologically, economically and politically. These effects of war have become more complex due to the Tsunami 2004 which was again felt strongly in the war affected areas and then, its consequent re-ignition of the war, triggered by non-negotiable dispute between the LTTE and the

GoSL over the division of rights and power in monitoring and distributing humanitarian aid and assistance in the war-cum-tsunami affected areas.

2. Causes of Disaster – ‘Natural’ or ‘Man-made’:

Disasters can be considered comprising of two types i.e. ‘natural disaster’ and ‘man-made/human-induced disaster’. Natural disasters are phenomena due to natural environmental processes such as earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, floods, landslides, storms, cyclones, tornadoes, high winds and so on whereas man-made disasters are the one due to human induced causes.

In very early days, ‘disaster’ (especially natural disasters) was considered as one of highly uncertain natural agents marked by sudden onset and unmanageable phenomena. It was traditionally believed as an act of God to limit human violation of nature or as punishment for their faults. However, as human society gradually developed with new technologies, new phenomena such as explosions, accidents involving chemicals, radioactive materials, nuclear power management and transport sectors which are mainly caused by human mistakes or negligence, were also encompassed under disasters. Gradually, disasters become closely related with various reasons regarding human technological errors and failure, sometimes combining with the process of nature. Such new characteristic features of disasters become a manifestation of conspicuous challenge to positivism of modern technology and its various technological designs which are one of the main characteristics of contemporary society and the evidence of human control over natural forces. Simultaneously, it also leads to a highly vulnerable human civilisation to various calamitous risks.

Uriel Rosenthal (Quarantelli (ed), 1998, p.148) expresses that disaster was concerned with the principle conditions of natural disasters (as the scourge of God i.e. the nature) along with the social or political negligence (such as technical failure or human error or ignorance of hazards). Contradictory to the perception of natural disaster as caused by natural forces, currently, the occurrence of disaster is considered to be predominantly due to control and mastery of modernity over uncontrollable forces of nature and also, the convincing evidence of humankind’s fallibility. Many disastrous events in this world are imposed by human actions – such as wars, emission of radioactive radiation due to failure of nuclear plants, depletion of ozone layers, etc., and many others are due to failure or negligence of preventive measures and lack of security. Such kinds of phenomena are generally known as ‘man-made disasters’. Therefore, studying disasters covers a range of typical events from natural related hazards (like floods, droughts, tornadoes, hurricanes, tsunami, earthquake, etc.) to man-made related events (like accidents, aircraft crashes, explosion, dam breaks, etc.) to other man-made disasters (like famine, epidemics, economic depression, wars and nuclear events).

Accordingly, conflicts or wars are also among such human-induced disasters resulting in thousands of deaths, destruction, damage, displacement, public disorders and human insecurity. Poverty and displacement due to war deprive people’s choices about where and how to live or they are forced to live in miserable conditions, which are vulnerable to additional risk by any kind of unfortunate disruption including natural calamities. Such communities are more affected due to their weak infrastructure and deprived or inadequate facilities. Threat to health and insecure socio-economic lives are common situations in such kind of contexts.

As quoted in Myers *et.al.* (2008, p.272), “Smith (2006) refutes the very idea that any disaster is “natural” in a pure sense....” There is no so called ‘natural disaster’ but it is the phenomenon of nature. A disaster can be triggered by a natural phenomenon but its impact is administered by the pre-disaster social condition and vulnerability of the affected society. The aspects of a disaster – such as causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and responses, and reconstruction – and the differences between how severe and suffering, how many have been killed, who are affected and so on, are all humanly constructed and socially calculated. Events such as earthquakes, tsunami, volcanoes, hurricanes, etc. are all parts of the natural processes but these processes are known as ‘disaster’ when human society is affected. As long as there is no disruption to human society, they remain the same but conditions become disastrous when human beings and their lives are affected.

In current times, humankind un-proportionately dominates and encroaches over natural forces and other creatures which were hitherto uncontrollable. At the same time, due to such human egocentric acts, there are increasingly various issues on ecological imbalance on earth and people suffer in return for their acts against nature as well as self-exposure to risk due to modern and scientific technologies. Also, Rockett (1999, p.43) argues that “the people are affected only because of the manner or location in which they choose to live....” Thus, disaster itself can be a complex form of linkages, chains and processes. For instance, the natural phenomena or so called ‘natural disaster’ such as cyclones, storms, floods, droughts, tsunami, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc. have become issues which are closely related with a long-term human intervention into ecological and environmental system. Such kind of disasters reflects the complexity of modern society and present-day technological interference and human exploitation over natural environment and its ecological system, resulting deformation of the natural balance. Therefore, natural disaster remains no longer as natural but it has been transformed into technological and social disaster.

Here, the term ‘natural’ has become a misleading description for disasters like droughts, floods and famine which are very common in most of the developing and underdeveloped countries. Today, such disasters are related with human-induced root causes like – destruction of forests and other activities for short-term economic gain, population explosion, migration, etc. – as well as prolonged structural and political negligence or ignorance in combating the hazardous causes and factors promoting such kind of disasters. Similarly, migration and over population in coastal areas increase human vulnerability due to high population densities. Such conditions of living are more prone to be affected than others. For instance, in Sri Lanka, many conflict-affected Tamils and Muslims took refuge and densely populated in unoccupied narrow strips of coastal land. Their conditions of housing and settlement were miserable due to absence of proper rehabilitation and again, they became the worst affected population when tsunami occurred due to such existing condition of living (Hyndman, 2009, p.92).

3. Perception of Disaster

Disaster is often defined differently by different agents according to their understanding, perception and knowledge which may be a wide range and accordingly, render its scope of conceptualisation from the purpose of their studies accordingly. For example, for the Red Cross, a disaster is a situation where services and relief assistance are heavily demanded due to a large-scale lack of essential requirements and basic amenities like water, nutrition, housing, clothing, medicines, aid, etc. (Quarantelli (ed), 1998, p.20). The same term may be defined differently from political point of views – such as, the breakdown of public disorder and social unrest may be the key focus, rather than the phenomena itself.

Even among researchers, some studies may focus on highlighting the consequences, some on analytical dimensions (like – duration of impact, magnitude of impact, affected social units, etc.), or comparing the problems resulted due to different types of disasters. The physical side of disaster, formulation of preventive policies and plans for any potentially disastrous event, and recovery efforts (if happened) are also significant areas in disaster research and its analysis.

However, the situation i.e. so called ‘disaster’ can be broadly focused on the breakdown of social order and people’s safety. In other words, it is the widespread acceptance among most researchers referring disaster as events that are socially disruptive and having impacts with considerable harm to people and physical environment although their occurrences may/may not be sudden and acute. But, its prior prevention and mitigation of their effects are considerably possible so that people’s suffering, losses and damage can be prevented if they are encountered in time, or otherwise, reduced to minimum limits.

3.1. Pre-event conditions of disaster

Understanding a disaster does not mean only dealing with the event, its impacts and social responses but the pre-event societal structure and its composition are also equally important. In fact, this pre-event condition of disaster directs the extent of its impact and consequent responses. For instance, alleged migration of population in a coastal area increases human vulnerability due to disproportionately increased population density, poor infrastructure, living areas closer to potentially dangerous sea calamities (like tsunami, cyclones, etc.), and settlements of settlement are severely affected with more number of deaths and damage when a sudden calamity occurs. This was the case in Sri Lanka – when Tsunami 2004 struck 70% of its coastline, the death tolls and damage were disproportionately higher in the war affected areas where huge number of war displaced population had sought refuge without institutional relief assistance (de Mel, 2007, p.240; Silva, 2009, p.65). On top of miserable housing and living condition, the areas were barren unoccupied narrow strips of land between sea and more inland lagoons. Thus, these pre-event conditions of disaster are termed as ‘preimpact conditions’ by Lindell *et.al.* (2006, p.154) and categorised into three. They are – (i) hazard exposure, (ii) physical vulnerability and (iii) social vulnerability. *Hazard exposure* is related with occupancy of geographical areas where people could be affected and severe damage of lives could be caused and their property by a specific type of events that can be natural or technological. The above case of Sri Lanka was an example of natural hazard exposure although tsunami is a natural phenomenon. Likewise, human population are also exposed to several technological hazards like explosions, accidents or hazardous materials released from industries, nuclear plants, urbanisation, rapid growth of population and environmental problems like climatic changes, global warming, imbalance in biodiversity, etc. *Physical vulnerability* is human vulnerability to hazardous agents that can cause death, injury and illness although the physiological response of the affected population often varies from individual to individual, family to family or community to community. This physical vulnerability is accountable not only for the human population but other ecological beings – plants and animals are also vulnerable to extreme causes. Affecting them is likely to produce another set of serious and dangerous results that can again adversely affect human populations. *Social vulnerability* refers to societal capacity and their way to look forward, cope with, resist, mitigate and recover from impacts of any hazardous occurrence. It also includes psychological, economic and political impacts at various levels – individual, family, community and societal. According to Lindell *et.al.* (2006, p.155), whereas people’s physical vulnerability refers to their susceptibility to biological changes (i.e., impacts on anatomical structures and physiological functioning), their social vulnerability refers to their susceptibility to behavioural changes. Regarding the extent of exposure to hazards and their behavioural characteristics to resist and cope with, there are some groups or subgroups of population within a disaster affected society which are more vulnerable and susceptible than the remaining majority. For example, women, children, older people, physically challenged and minorities. For such groups, it is important to identify the variability in vulnerability and their needs within communities even if their communities as a whole have been affected by disasters.

3.2. Three event-specific conditions

Although it is well known that identification and anticipation of pre-disaster hazards, vulnerability and factors that could cause a disaster would help to resist and mitigate harmful impacts, it still remains an unattainable aspiration for human society. Thus, disaster happens in every society although its magnitude of impacts and response are different from one another. Again, Lindell *et.al.* (2006, p.153) classify the occurrence of disaster, particularly the instantaneous scenario and its resultant responses into three specific conditions as (i) hazard event characteristics, (ii) improvised disaster responses and (iii) improvised disaster recovery.

3.2.1. Hazard event characteristics

These are the significant characteristics of each agent or factor that collectively causes the so called disaster and impacts on human population directly or indirectly. However, it is difficult to establish characteristics of a particular hazard agent because it can overlap with another or can even initiate various numbers of threats. But if its distinct threats are once distinguished from others, then it can be differentiated and characterised in terms of the speed of onset, availability of perceptual cues (like ground movement, wind or sea level), the intensity, scope and duration of impacts, and the probability of occurrence. For example, a tsunami is a series of large water waves in the sea caused by an earthquake or displacement of a large volume of the water body.

These huge tidal waves not only cause damage of lives and property in the coastal areas but also initiate numerous hazardous factors like flood, epidemics, contamination of water, etc. Here, the scope of onset and availability of perpetual cues make people aware of and prepare for emergency response actions. Its intensity is generally determined in terms of the hazard's impact on the physical materials involved and the energy that these materials impart. For instance, the physical material that determines the intensity of the tsunami 2004 was the huge and large, 3 to 6.5 metres high above mean sea level, that destroyed structures and accelerated debris that can itself cause various others like traumatic injuries. And the scope of impact shows the affected social units like individual, families, etc. and destruction of physical structures. This scope of impact is indirectly influenced by the probability of occurrence (say, per unit of time) because any probable hazard (if aware) mobilises people to engage accordingly with appropriate measures of hazard mitigation and its related activities to minimise their vulnerability and impacts of the event.

3.2.2. Improvised Disaster Response

It is the immediate spontaneous activities to adapt with the disaster stricken situation. This adaptive response occurs only when people start realising that something i.e. an unusual event has happened. Otherwise, it needs to provide information about the situation so that people themselves initiate their protective action. At this point of time, as an immediate response, people commonly react and assist each other within their traditional social units like their households or families and neighbourhoods whereas initiation of social organisations to cope with the disaster's demand and provide assistance to the needs takes a little longer. However, according to demands of the situation people automatically and informally start forming collective action, co-operation and then an informal organisation. This collective efforts and co-operation is not only among themselves but also with existing organisations which are mainly responsible for emergency response. Sometimes, when these organisations are unable to meet or respond to the emergency needs of the situation, they expand with new members from the locality. The situation also occasionally leads them to extend their tasks or even merge with new organisations both formally and informally.

3.2.3. Improvised Disaster Recovery

It is a long term process of disaster recovery within the disaster stricken society, which usually starts when the emergency or crisis situation is once alleviated to the point that there is not much imminent threat of destruction to life and property or the intensity and continuation of hazardous event is abated to that extent. However, it is not necessary to start improvised disaster recovery after improvised disaster response. Instead, they can happen simultaneously. The general tasks covered by improvised disaster recovery are reconstruction and rehabilitation of the affected population, damage assessment and reconstruction of infrastructure. For these, resources are primarily derived from the government, social and organisational contribution, and even international communities.

Theoretically, disasters are events that can be observed with time and space, within which physical damage and losses, and disruption to social environment and routine functioning as impacts of the events are caused to societies or a division of it (like communities, regions or states) as social units. In return, social units enact responses to the impacts (Kreps, 1984, p.311). Further, he adds that the causes and consequences are associated with social structures and processes in that society where the events occurred. So, accordingly, the responses to the events are also socially (and politically) subjective.

Besides, Kreps (1984, p.312) states, "The 'property spaces' of each of these general dimensions can be physical, temporal, or social, with the relative emphasis depending on which one or ones are being examined." Here, the general dimensions refer to events, impacts, social units and responses. It means that all the four dimensions can be examined in their (i) physical characteristics (e.g. the physical characteristic of *events* as releasing energy and forces that cause the physical damage and social disruption, *impacts* as damage to the surroundings, *social units* as affected divisions that can be labelled by their locations or sizes, and *responses* as the structural involvement in preventive or recovery process); (ii) temporal characteristics (e.g. that of *events* as its durability of occurring, *impacts* as its duration, *social units* as time of origin relative to the occurrence of the event due to which the society or its parts are affected, and *responses* as relevant period before, during, or after the impact is felt); and (iii) social characteristics (e.g. that of *events* as declaration of this event as a disaster, *impacts* as the degree of disruption, *social units* as societal levels like communities, regions, states or nations and *responses* as reaction from a variety of social and organizational processes). The sizes or degree or areas of these four dimensions may be different according to types of studies and respective interpretation.

Yet, irrespective of what type the disaster is, it is a social problem and needs to compel a collective reaction in a form of social actions responding to the situation. According to Quarantalli (1999, p.11), disasters are primarily results of human action and not a physical happening but a social occasion. Sometimes, Dombrowsky (Quarantelli (ed), 1998, p.23) calls it a 'social catalyst', although societies or its divisions may respond in different ways. These differences in responding to disasters i.e. social action again depend on factors - the kinds of hazard, extent of hazard awareness, cultural orientations, knowledge and experiences about events, and the resources available. These spheres of social action are equally important before, during and after the disaster. For instance, if there is a prior awareness about a potential disaster among a given social unit, the three characteristics (i.e. physical, temporal and social) of the four dimensions of disasters will be different from those of another which have not had any prior notice about it. Therefore, disaster can be interpreted as a socially constructed and a sociological concept in this sense.

For this collective social action, it is obvious, among participants in the form of social units to reveal networks, communication, decision making and involvement of control structures for efficient and effective results is desirable. Such social actions can be performed by either social units (like individuals, families, communities, organizations, and bureaucracies) which are established before the disaster occurs and continue after it is over, or, the ones (like rescue teams, organisations) which are emergent and short-lived. During the course of the social actions that may be short-lived or long depending on demands, several problems in management, communication and co-ordination among various social actors may be revealed too.

4. Impacts of disasters – physical/social impacts:

Impacts of disasters are multi-dimensional. Broadly, such impacts can be divided between those material destruction and loss which are immediate affects due to the incidence i.e. short term impacts, and those which are not directed but an effect in long term. According to Kreps (1984, p.310), impacts of disaster can be identified into two – *physical impacts* and *social impacts*.

4.1. Physical Impacts

The *physical impacts* of disaster are material or bodily losses including deaths, injuries and property damage. However, the extent of losses depends on the three mentioned pre-impact conditions of disaster (i.e. hazard exposure, physical vulnerability and social vulnerability), hazard event characteristics and immediate improvised disaster responses. The physical impacts of disaster are the most common, easily observable and measurable consequence of a disaster, but there is a significant variation in numbers of deaths, injuries and damage by communities and countries. The death tolls of disasters are usually higher in developing and underdeveloped countries of Asia, Africa and South America, than those in developed countries.

Low-income countries suffer approximately 3,000 deaths per disaster, whereas the corresponding figure for high-income countries is approximately 500 deaths per disaster. Moreover, these disparities appear to be increasing because the average annual death toll in developed countries declined by at least 75% between 1960 and 1990, but the same time period saw increases of over 400% in developing countries. (Quoted from Berk (1995); Lindell et al., 2006, p.157)

Such disparity also exists among different demographic and geographical features of the affected areas. At this point, referring and understanding the significances of the three pre-event hazardous conditions of disaster help to predict and analyse the causes of variation in vulnerability and impacts of disaster because simply estimating the death tolls and injuries of the disaster is not only difficult to conduct but also insufficient to determine why and how it has happened, and what should be done to prevent it. Besides, it is arguable and problematic if all the deaths after the onset of disaster are considered as deaths exclusively due to the disaster. Disaster impacts may only be a triggering or contributing factor to casualties with many pre-existing problems like poor infrastructure, improper settlement, underprivileged living style or health conditions, lack of awareness and preventive measures, and even indirect consequences of the hazard agents, for example, death caused by epidemics, breaking out fire, clashes in refugee camps, gender blind awareness, domestic violence, substance abuse, etc.

Besides, losses of properties like built structures, crops and animals are also important parts of physical impacts. Such losses are not only results of physical or material destruction but also damage to the quality, for example, chemical or radioactive contamination and reduction of land fertility due to subsidence or erosion or accumulation of saline water during disasters like flood, tsunami, etc. Thus, in short, physical impacts of disaster include damage to residential, commercial, industrial, infrastructure and public/community services sectors. Among them, destruction to residential/household dwellings (including basics requirements like food, clothes, medicine and shelter) is the most significant structural impact on an affected community because delayed or improper immediate response to it would again ignite several other problems, especially health. However, in terms of disaster recovery for the affected population, it will be a long term process which is again more complicated in situations with high level of poverty, racial/ethnic conflict and minority related issues. Simultaneously, it is also significant to pay attention for weaker and more vulnerable groups, particularly female, children, older, etc.

4.2. Social impacts

Social impacts are another form of disaster impacts that can develop over a long period of time, and are more difficult to assess when they occur. They include psychosocial, demographic, economic and political impacts. In spite of the difficulty in assessment, it is essential to monitor and even anticipate these social impacts if possible because a long term functioning or recovery of any specific type of social structure and its mechanism depends on them. It not only helps in the process of disaster reconstruction, but it is also required to develop a contingency plan for the prevention of any adverse consequences from happening.

Also, at individual, familial and community levels, disasters cause negative psychological responses. These include psycho-physiological effects (like fatigue, gastrointestinal upset, tics, etc.), cognitive signs (like confusion, impaired concentration, attention deficits, etc.), emotional signs (like anxiety, depression and grief, etc.) and behavioural effects (like sleeplessness, lack of appetite, ritualistic behaviour, substance abuse, etc.). These kinds of disaster impacts are more common in some particular segments of population, such as, widows, children, frail elderly, pre-existing mentally ill persons, racial and ethnic minorities, and family members of those who have died in the disaster. Such negative psychological impacts are seriously disruptive in social functioning especially for these above mentioned groups of people. Although there are other disaster victims who could more or less adapt and cope with such psychological impacts, and engage to save their own lives as well as those of their closed ones, still they are generally ended up with psychological impacts in long term adaptive process. For example, their risk perception is changed (i.e. believe in the likelihood to occur disasters and remain anxious) and there is increased hazard intrusiveness (i.e. frequently thinking and discussing hazards).

Emigration is another social disaster impact. It may be due to various causes that relate with the disaster – such as, to escape from recurrence of disasters (also it could be due to the psychological impacts), economic issues (like searching for livelihood), and for social and political security (in case of minorities in conflict areas). For the economical issues, the affected areas may be left only with weak members of families while those who are physically able and particularly the main bread-earners are away from home. Such kind of demographic changes leads to transform social and cultural role, especially between male and female. Likewise, for those who have migrated to other places for social, economic and political reasons, they also need to adjust and adapt to flow of the new environment where there may be again different social, economic and political culture.

Usually in disaster affected areas, people lose almost all sorts of economic sources and activities – regular earning (especially wage earners), livelihood (agricultural and occupational means of production and business) and losses of properties – except sources from government services. The extent of this economic impact of a disaster accordingly depends on the disposition of the damaged assets, resources and livelihood of the people. If there is not appropriate assistance and timely rehabilitation, then it causes not only reduction in income, consumption and so living standard, but also increased health problems and decrease in economic productivity. Such situation is also prone to conflicts if, sometimes, there is an intense competition with neighbours on limited resources available. In case of Sri Lanka, when the government (predominantly occupied by the majority community, Sinhala) could not distribute resources proportionately to different ethnic communities after getting independence in 1948, minority groups (especially Tamils and Muslims) had lost their faith on the government. Besides, the country faced many nonnegotiable political disputes and even conflicts among these communities. Additionally, it makes a slowdown in social and economic development of the society.

All these above disaster impacts may again cause social activism for social and political change especially when people have interminably waited for the disaster rehabilitation and recovery or when there is large discontentment in the process, particularly among ethnic minorities or politically weaker groups of people. During these periods, there is a high chance of evolving victims' grievances (for example, on reconstruction of housing, distribution of relief aid and assistance, rehabilitation and resettlement programmes, health services, division of infrastructures, employment opportunities and other public distributive services) at mass level and thus, a new conflict situation among communities or groups of people may be developed if there is no suitable response from respective authorities and the government. At the same time, people may attempt to redress their grievances through collective action and may even challenge prevailing patterns of governance. Such active groups may possibly try to expand their membership and increase their strength explicitly with political agenda. In case of racial or ethnic community groups, they may widen their domain (in terms of strategy, vision, purpose or goals) and even engage with many other like-minded groups. Such groups may become directly or indirectly influential to local and central government agencies and even legislators. Sometimes, they can pressurise the authorities to fulfil their demands or withdraw any action or decision if they disapprove. For political parties including the party in power, it is the time to gain or seek public sympathy for future elections. Thus, disaster impacts need political involvements by different actors of the affected society and also there are political impacts of disaster on the existing politics.

Besides, these do not cover all of the social impacts of disaster. It can affect more in-depth psycho-social phenomena of the society. When a disaster remains protracted and keeps on affecting people without enough disaster response and recovery for several years (for example, in the case of Sri Lankan conflict), people unwillingly have to accept the unbearable disaster impacts. Such conditions of living, like living in the middle of sudden bombing and attacks, evolve alongside the social and psychological development of the affected people and thus, become normalised (not willingly but due to absence of choice).

5. One Disaster to Another Disaster

Sometimes, the current conditions of disaster, of which the disaster agents seem to be a clear-cut instance of a distinct form of calamitous event, may also turn into a totally different form of disaster. For instance, after the outbreak of Tsunami in Sri Lanka, the process of the post tsunami humanitarian and reconstruction in the country has been the trigger for resuming the conflict between the GoSL and the LTTE. Thus, post-tsunami Sri Lanka, which is in a condition of a disaster i.e. tsunami, becomes an instance of another form of disaster i.e. the war/conflict between the two belligerents. In this case, the exact predicament is not with the material and immaterial losses or the number of deaths due to tsunami but with the social and political turmoil and unleashes the prolonged hitherto unnoticeable forces for a different disaster i.e. the war. Thus, the disaster agents may possibly lose its ground in the disaster context; rather, perverse effects of intricate social and political interactions including well-intended decisions, measures and management may come to the fore of the context. It was labelled by Rosenthal (Quarantelli (ed), 1998, p.152) as "subsequent problems and intricacies by the socially and politically correct phase of 'recovery' or 'rehabilitation'."

However, there are many things which cannot be simply concerned with the words which are used in expression. For instance, in the traditional view of disaster, an operational error can be seen beyond the unfortunate sudden failure at a specific time. It can bring a broader context of deficiency in safety measures, long-term ignorance or negligence of possible hindrances and latent forces that may be dangerous if not dealt in right time, and lack of efficient counter-disaster managing policies and programmes. When such kind of disasters outbursts somewhere at a point of time, it may have a more intense impact and longer duration than the apparent disaster. Or, the situation may be more complicated due to combination of multiple disasters. For instance, the situation of Sri Lanka is a multi-layered impact of various disasters i.e. conflict between the LTTE and GoSL, Tsunami 2004 and resumption of the conflict again.

6. Disaster beyond the Boundaries/International Level

Disasters which are now located in a particular place are no longer considered within a territorial specificity and nor as instances of sudden onset, both of which were important aspects in traditional view. In short, the impacts of either natural or man-made disasters often transcend state/national boundaries and issues of social and technological safety from repeated occurrence of the same have become a global consideration. And it has become one of the contemporary burning issues in most countries – such as deforestation, contamination of water and soil, desertification, depletion of ozone layer, global warming, rise of sea-level, increased imbalance in ecological balance and so on. Such disasters which are caused by various protracted factors and also need prolonged efforts globally to cope with the situation are termed as 'creeping disaster' by Rosenthal (Quarantelli (ed), 1998, p.150&152). For prevention of similar occurrences, sometimes, introduction of voluntary or mandatory regulations are required to be designed.

Their impacts become a transnational issue, politically, socially, economically and even culturally, which needs to have a consolidated effort in response. It also affects both national and international humanitarian aid along with the ideology and its related relief operations which are again closely linked with accusations of politics and favouritism in and around the affected areas. At this point, the sensitisation and understanding of such transnational intricate issues in the process of responding and providing aid/assistance are also very important. For instance, cross-border or international migration due to such kinds of disaster cannot be looked only as a disaster occurring in that specific area but has to be an issue of the host area/country where its social, political and economic situations are more or less influenced. Accordingly, rehabilitation and relief operations need to be in the level of international consideration.

Thus, while disaster research has historically confined and considered itself in the societal level or below – i.e. regional, community and household, societies themselves can also be studied as a part of a broader world system which is equally vulnerable to disaster. For example, there are fears and uncertainties about a massive destruction due to a nuclear war or accident of nuclear plants in a country due to which the whole world is prone to be affected equally with the host country.

7. Conclusion

The term 'Disaster' is very broad. It is defined differently by different scholars. Besides, it may bring social changes to the society as both its physical and social impacts are closely related with the pre-existing social, political and economic condition of the affected society. Such changes alternatively become the causes of variation in vulnerability and impacts of disaster. Thus, it can be concluded that disaster is a consequence of both natural-environmental phenomena and human activities including their living condition. In case of Sri Lanka, people in war-affected areas i.e. northern and eastern parts already suffered due to the prolonged war between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. While people living in a bad condition of living due to the war, huge waves of Tsunami hit the area and its impacts were worse than what it was supposed to be. Later, due to such natural caused disaster, a myriad of international humanitarian aids and rehabilitation services – which were previously not available although it was war affected – have thronged the country. However, it became re-ignition of hostility over the question of political disputes and claims of authority between the government and the LTTE over the distribution and management of international funds and humanitarian relief assistance in conflict-affected areas – especially the 'uncleared' territories where the Sri Lankan government was unable to keep under their direct political authority. Later, as the situation became complex and armed fighting was resumed again, many international humanitarian agencies could not intervene in Sri Lanka and the affected people remained desperate in their miserable conditions of living.

8. References

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