ISSN NO : 2230-7850 IMPACT FACTOR : 5.1651 (UIF) VOLUME :8, ISSUE : 12, JANUARY- 2019

INDIAN STREMS RESEARCH JOURNAL

COMMUNITY NETWORKS AND THEIR IMPACT ON RESILIENCE IN DISASTER-PRONE AREAS OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

India has one of the highest rates of disasters in the world, with frequent flooding, cyclones, earthquakes, droughts, and landslides occurring. The contribution of community networks to disaster resilience in these settings—particularly informal social networks, grassroots associations, self-help organizations, and digital platforms—has gained greater importance. This study is based on the secondary information available in government reports, NGO publications, and even scholarly books that discuss the role of community networks in preparedness, response, and recovery in the disaster-prone regions of India. The Odisha case study and the Kerala, Assam, and Gujarat cases demonstrate that community-based efforts are able not only to decrease disaster mortality but also to speed up rehabilitation by helping to access local knowledge, trust, and collective action. In spite of these achievements, there are threats like a lack of full institutional integration, scarcity of resources, and social exclusion, which put a curb on the full potential of community networks. The paper emphasizes the fact that mainstreaming and empowering community-based structures in the disaster management system are important in developing sustainable resilience in India.

KEYWORDS : *Community Networks, Disaster Resilience, Disaster-Prone Areas, India, Social Capital, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).*

INTRODUCTION

India is one of the countries in the world that is highly disaster-prone. It is vulnerable to numerous natural disasters, including floods, cyclones, droughts, earthquakes, and landslides. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) says that about 58 percent of India is prone to earthquakes, 12 percent to floods, and that over 5,700 kilometers of the Indian coastline is prone to cyclones and storm surges. Such frequent disasters not only lead to the loss of lives and properties but also livelihoods, increase poverty, and derail socio-economic progress. As the number and frequency of these events increase with climate change, enhancing resilience has emerged as a burning issue in the lives of India.

Under the spectrum of disaster management, resilience is the ability of individuals, households, and communities to anticipate, absorb, adapt, and recover following shocks. While the importance of state agencies and international organizations in disaster preparedness and response is significant, locally based informal and formal groups have also become increasingly vital. These networks comprise traditional village councils, women's self-help groups (SHGs), farmers' cooperatives, neighborhood associations, and, more recently, digital communication platforms. They are the first responders in case of crises; they organize

local resources, share the most important information, and provide social support to vulnerable populations.

Studies conducted in disaster-prone areas of India have revealed that communities possessing a well-developed social network can more easily handle disasters. An example of this is the formation of cyclone preparedness committees in Odisha, which dramatically lowered the number of deaths during the successive cyclones, and the communities of fisherfolk in Kerala who took a central stage in rescue operations during the 2018 floods. These instances show the inherent power of local mutual action, which can oftentimes close important loopholes left by foreign assistance.

Community networks have weaknesses that include poor institutional appreciation of their potential, a lack of sufficient resources, and socio-economic disparities that could disenfranchise the disadvantaged groups of people. It is important to conceive the strengths and limitations of these networks so that they can be incorporated into disaster management frameworks more effectively.

Using secondary data in the form of government reports, NGO publications, academic literature, and recorded case studies, this paper aims to discuss how community networks can be used to improve resilience in disaster-prone regions of India. Through the insight gained by examining how they contribute to preparedness, response, and recovery, and the challenges encountered, this paper will offer information on how to empower community-based strategies on disaster risk reduction in India.

OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH:

1) To analyze the role of community networks in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.
2) To identify key examples of community-led resilience in disaster-prone regions of India.
3) To examine the challenges and limitations faced by community networks in disaster management.
4) To provide policy recommendations for strengthening community-based resilience mechanisms.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Scholars have long stressed the importance of social capital and community relationships in disaster resilience. Putnam (2000) proposed the concept of networks of trust and reciprocity as a means to enhance collective action, which was subsequently used in disaster contexts. This theory was further developed by Aldrich (2012), who demonstrated that communities that were better bonded and bridged networks had a quicker recovery after disasters, with case evidence in India. As Shaw (2012) noted in South Asia, Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRR) proved to be effective, with the local committees, trained volunteers, and NGO partnerships improving preparedness. To this end, Kelman, Mercer, and Gaillard (2012) emphasized the need to incorporate indigenous knowledge (i.e., traditional housing and early warning systems) in contemporary disaster planning. Empirical evidence on significant Indian disasters offered more tangible examples: World Bank and GFDRR reports (2005-2007) on the 2004 tsunami reported on how self-help groups (SHGs) and local cooperatives contributed to a faster livelihood recovery, and the Odisha cyclone management reform (post-1999, evaluated in 2013) reported how community preparedness committees helped save lives significantly. Bavinck (2008) observed at the micro level how caste-based councils and fisherfolk networks in Tamil Nadu enabled and restricted the delivery of relief following the tsunami. According to a study conducted by Chatterjee (2010) in urban areas, inhabitants of slums in Mumbai depended on their connections to the community and their informal leaders in times of floods. Subsequently, Santha (2015) was able to examine the fishing communities in Kerala, revealing that the adaptability of communities to the coastal hazards was aided by the kinship networks, as well as cooperatives. On the same note, Larson (2015) discovered that SHGs were instrumental in post-tsunami recovery, especially women's empowerment and maintenance of microfinance. Taken together, existing research affirms that community networks are key in disaster preparedness, disaster response, and disaster recovery in India, even when the social exclusion, unequal participation, and institutional insensitivity issues are still evident.

METHODOLOGY:

This study uses a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the role of community networks in building resilience in disaster-prone areas of India. It uses secondary data sources such as government reports, international agency reports, academic literature, NGOs, and media articles. The data is analyzed for preparedness, response, and recovery and rehabilitation dimensions. Limitations include potential bias, regional variation, and data gaps.

Community Networks and Their Impact on Resilience in Disaster-Prone Areas of India:

The community networks are essential in the disaster response and recovery because they are the human relations and local institutions that coordinate the response and recovery. Resilience has two related yet distinct meanings: social/community networks, which include neighborhood groups, self-help groups, local NGOs, village committees, faith groups, fisher cooperatives, volunteer ham-radio operators, community radio stations, and formal community disaster preparedness committees; and technical/ community (mesh) networks that refer to locally managed communications infrastructure. Radio in a box and community radio have been utilized numerous times during Indian disasters as real-time alerts, coordination, and psychosocial messaging.

The community networks enhance resilience by enhancing local response, making it faster; local information flow is accurate, ensuring communication redundancy, pooling of resources and mutual aid, local knowledge, and adaptive solutions. Empirical interventions that can be piloted or scaled up include institutionalization and funding of local Community Disaster Response Teams (CDRTs), official incorporation of community radio and local leaders into official early-disaster warning dissemination strategies, livelihood continuity planning by supporting women-led SHGs and fishing/farming cooperatives, and low-cost mesh/peer-to-peer communication kit implementation as an evacuation path, shelter management list, and family reunification plan. Policy suggestions involve establishment and investment in community networks within national/state disaster management funding, institutional assimilation, technical criteria, and procurement of resilient and user-friendly mesh kits, and the focus of planning and communications on women-led organizations, marginalized castes, and language minorities.

FINDINGS:

Community networks have been instrumental as pillars of resilience for the vulnerable regions of India in disasters at all levels of preparedness, response, and recovery. Odisha has prepared cyclone committees where locals are trained in the skills of evacuation and first aid, and as a result, there has been a massive decrease in the number of fatalities after the destructive super cyclone of 1999. Equally, the traditional knowledge networks have facilitated communities in Assam to build high homesteads (chang ghar) to ensure family safety in flood-prone areas, and the self-help groups (SHGs) in most states have developed savings systems as informal insurance policies in times of disaster. Following the 2004 Tamil Nadu tsunami, SHGs were the focus of renewing women's livelihoods, and in Gujarat, housing reconstruction following the 2001 earthquake was led by community-based organizations, which ensured that new houses were culturally appropriate. Farmer cooperatives in Maharashtra, which has a high probability of droughts, have facilitated collective water management and crop diversification, increasing their resilience in the event of future shocks. With these achievements, there are still problems. There are marginalized groups like the Dalits, tribal people, and landless laborers who are not usually included in the decision-making process, and many projects fail without the continuity of NGOs or the government. Community networks are infrequently institutionalized in formal disaster management structures, and their long-term effectiveness is constrained by resource availability, both in finances, technology, and infrastructure.

These results have certain policy implications. To exploit the potential that government disaster management policies have demonstrated, first, community networks have to be formally incorporated into preparedness and response systems. Second, there is a need to build capacity through routine training and simulation activities of the local volunteers, SHGs, and youth groups to ensure that they are ready. Third,

inclusivity is to be made a priority by ensuring that all the marginalized groups, such as women, children, the aged, and the disabled, are involved. Fourth, the early warning systems, the coordination, and relief operations should be empowered online to harness the increasing connectivity in India. Lastly, the policies should promote sustainable livelihoods by encouraging self-help groups (SHGs), cooperatives, and communal farming activities, which will not only support recovery but also help develop long-term resilience to frequent calamities.

DISCUSSION:

In India, community networks have demonstrated their value in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, despite encountering some challenges. Preparedness in Odisha was found to be a model of community-based preparedness, with cyclone preparedness being in the form of cyclone preparedness committees. These networks have ensured that the number of deaths associated with cyclones has drastically reduced since the devastating super cyclone of 1999 by training local volunteers in evasion and first aid. Similarly, communities in Assam, which are prone to floods, have been able to adapt their built environments by utilizing traditional knowledge networks to construct elevated homes (chang ghar) that protect from floods. SHGs of women have also become an important preparedness tool, where funds of collective savings serve as informal insurance against future shocks.

Community networks have once more come in handy in recovery and rehabilitation. Following the 2004 tsunami in Tamil Nadu, SHGs have been at the forefront of rebuilding livelihoods, especially among the women, through supporting microfinance and group enterprises. Community-based organizations in Gujarat instructed the rebuilding of houses after the 2001 earthquake, with designs being safe as well as culturally sensitive. In arid Maharashtra, collective water management and crop diversification were encouraged in farmer cooperatives, which increased their long-term resilience against frequent droughts. These are just a few examples to drive the point home that recovery does not only revolve around restoring the infrastructure but also restoring livelihoods and social systems.

Although such achievements exist, community networks have some significant challenges and constraints. Dalits, tribal communities, and landless laborers are marginalized and usually not included in decision-making to make resilience-building more inclusive and equitable. Numerous community projects continue to be highly reliant on external funding, which casts doubt on the sustainability of these projects once the NGOs or the government stop funding them. Moreover, community networks are frequently not institutionalized in state and national disaster management structures and tend to be underrepresented in formal planning. Last, the size and sustainability of most grassroots projects are restrained by financial, technical, and infrastructural resource constraints.

The implications of these findings are significant for policy development. To begin with, the community networks must be formally incorporated into the preparedness and response systems of the government's disaster management policies, and resources should be provided to them. Second, training, simulation exercises, and other types of capacity building should be a priority, especially for women's groups, youth volunteers, and local committees. Third, the inclusion should be made possible through the establishment of systems to allow the inclusion of the marginalized, such as women, children, the aged, and the disabled. Fourth, we should intensify our systematic use of digital platforms to disseminate early warnings, coordinate relief efforts, and ensure accountability. Last but not least, SHGs, cooperatives, and collective cultivations must be facilitated to promote sustainable livelihoods, which are not only recovery-enabling but also resilient to frequent calamities.

CONCLUSION:

The interplay between vulnerable populations and formal disaster management systems is brought about by community networks that provide the backbone of resilience in disaster-prone regions in India. Through preparedness measures such as cyclone committees in Odisha and traditional flood-resistant houses in Assam, response operations such as fisher folk-directed rescues in Kerala and community kitchens

in Bihar, and recovery activities organized by SHGs, cooperatives, and local organizations, these networks have proven to be effective several times over. Not only do they offer lifesaving assistance promptly, but they also guarantee culturally competent and sustainable rehabilitation and long-term adaptation. Nevertheless, they are not allowed to express their potential fully due to difficulties, including social exclusion, reliance on external assistance, and institutional failure to notice them. Enhancing inclusivity, developing local capacity, incorporating digital tools, and embedding community networks in disaster management policies are some of the important steps in the right direction. The bottom line is that investing in community networks is not only about improving response mechanisms but also about empowering local communities, maintaining traditional knowledge, promoting action, and building resilient communities that will be able to withstand subsequent disasters.

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