

# NATURAL DISASTERS SURROUNDED BY POLITICAL CRISIS: THE 2014 FLOOD IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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*Abstract: This paper explores the political impact of the 2014 floods in the contentious and conflict-prone Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The September 2014 floods were the most serious natural disaster in the state in the past sixty years, and affected some two million people in the Kashmir valley. Drawing on qualitative interview evidence from hundred flood victims in North Kashmir (Bandipora), and central Kashmir (Srinagar), the paper examines the extent to which the disaster transformed existing political narratives. In doing so, it examines the role of the state and central governments, the army, local volunteers, and the media. The paper concludes that the political impact of the floods was limited, but that it provided a brief, revealing glimpse of social and political realities.*

*Key Words: - Media Accounts, Youth Volunteers, the Politics of Flood Disaster in Kashmir*

## INTRODUCTION:

The 2014 flood in Jammu & Kashmir were by far the most serious natural disaster in living memory in the state, and directly affected two million people. Heavy monsoon rains for five consecutive days led to landslides and rising water levels that completely inundated thousands of villages and large parts of the state capital Srinagar under fifteen or more feet of water. Hundreds of thousands were displaced by the floods for up to a month, often returning to find their houses destroyed and assets lost.

The widespread destruction wrought by the floods inevitably intersected with the intense political contentions and divisions on the ground. Jammu and Kashmir is a divided and disputed territory, the subject of rival international claims and wars fought between India and Pakistan. In the Muslim majority Kashmir valley, which falls in the Indian part of the state, there is widespread and open hostility to Indian rule, and deep resentment towards its security forces. This stems on the one hand from the larger unresolved and long festering political problem that is a legacy of the disputed incorporation of the state into India in 1947. Kashmiris are very conscious of their politically ambiguous status, and aspire for a final political resolution to the dispute. But on the other hand, anger at the Indian state also has a sharper, more recent edge that stems from the unhealed scars of the brutal militancy and counter insurgency period of the early 1990s, in which an unknown number of people assumed to be in the tens of thousands were killed, tortured, or disappeared. Armed militancy has subsided significantly since it peaked in 2002, and the everyday security situation for civilians has improved significantly. Yet the relationship between the state and people has remained tense and prone to breakdown. Kashmiris reject Indian rule, view the security forces as an alien army of occupation, and are scornful of local electoral politics as an instrument of this. Yet the manifest impossibility of changing this painful reality means that anger and anguish feed bitterness and impotent rage. Even isolated incidents of violence involving the security forces spark valley wide protests for several days. In 2009 there was a wave of protests over the rape and murder of two young women in the southern district of Shopian. In 2010, there was an even longer and more protracted wave of unrest and 'stone pelting' in which over one hundred people were killed. In 2013, the valley erupted in protests for days over the execution of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri convicted for the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament. As such Kashmir has been locked in a state of wounded abnormality for so long that the extraordinary has become routinized a part of the ordinary. People factor frequent disruptions into the coping strategies of normal life. Everyday forms of resistance against the status of the same area alongside the everyday necessity to collaborate with it. It is this context that forms the point of departure to understand the 2014 floods, the crisis caused by a natural disaster was layered on over what was an extended, pre-existing political crisis.

In Kashmir as in other such cases, the disaster created a brief moment in which established relationships, hierarchies, rivalries and patterns of life were temporarily suspended, shaken, and disturbed. As is often cited in the case of post tsunami Provence. The disaster bears new possibilities for actors to transcend the past, envision ground-realities anew, and forge transformative relationships. Indeed, all the main actors involved the army, state government, national government, state and national media, pro-independence politicians, local and national volunteer organizations, NGOs, and Kashmiri civilians – already had long histories of interaction and were, because of the circumstances, forced to relate and consider one another in different ways.

The political impact of the 2014 floods in Kashmir. There has been a growing body of research in recent years on the politics of natural disasters that seeks to explain their impact and consequences in terms of the human social context rather than its physical geography. Within this, there are five important clusters of writing that warrant closer attention in framing the Kashmir floods. Firstly, disasters serve as a moment of political revelation. As Cuny (1983: 54) writes "Disasters often highlight the social struggles in a society and underscore the inherent inequities within a political system". Similarly, Pelling and Dill (2006:4) explain how "The way in which the state and other sectors act in response and recovery is largely predicated on the kind of political relationships that existed between sectors before the crisis". The abrupt suspension of normal life lifts the veil and provides profound, raw, undisguised and frequently very shocking insights into the inner structures of that world. The relationship between state and society, tested under duress, becomes transparent in the public domain. The spontaneous rise of voluntarism, the dysfunctional ties of the state, the hypocrisy of the powerful, and the opportunism of politicians are all briefly and viscerally evident in their nakedness under conditions of Emergency. Secondly, and often as a consequence of the disturbing realities that they reveal, disasters become a

focal point for public outrage and become moments of political rupture and reinvention. Disaster politics have a particularly sharp effect on the relationship between state and society, and raise fundamental questions about citizenship and state society relations. Within the first few days of the floods in Kashmir, there were already competing and confusing claims about who was responsible for the tragedy, and who was directing rescue operations and providing relief. There were widespread complaints on the ground that the state government was ineffective and absent. Media reports, particularly from the New Delhi-based national media, tended to emphasize the positive role of the Indian armed forces, and to suggest that this had transformed their relationship with the Kashmiri people. Interview responses instead suggested that local volunteers played a much more important role, and that the floods had if anything reinforced the mistrust and bitterness among the public toward the state apparatus. Numerous other political actors in the valley also sought to frame the disaster within their own political compulsions. In other words, the analysis of the political consequences of natural disasters must take into account a model that is more complicated than that of a linear causal effect from natural disaster to political outcomes such as tipping points. What complicates the model is that it also operates as the cognitive framework of political actors on the ground. All those who are conscious of the political profit to be reaped from a disaster will seek to anticipate, pre-empt, and influence events, images, and narratives in the hope of instrumentalizing the disaster to their advantage.

The agenda of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, it draws upon survivor narratives from the floods to distill out a reconstruction of some key elements of the disaster as it unfolded.

I collected hundred flood victims with in depth interviews in the valley from some of the main flood-affected districts of, Srinagar, Bandipora, Sonawari tehsil in the Bandipora district, and Baramulla in the north. 2014 in the aftermath of the floods as people were returning to find their homes and in the period before the state election campaign started. Interviewees were selected through structured interview schedule. By doing so, we hoped to capture some of the commonalities and differences in narratives across geographical and class divides. The interviewees included relatively wealthy social and business elites in affluent parts of Bandipora, lower middle class shop-keepers, public sector employees, Tailors, Students, teachers, Social workers, Drivers, Carpenters, Patwaries, and Advocates.

S.No	Respondent	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Govt. Employee	21	21%
2.	Teacher	13	13%
3.	Farmer	13	13%
4.	Student	11	11%
5.	Social Worker	10	10%
6.	Shopkeeper	5	5%
7.	Driver	3	3%
8.	Tailor	3	3%
9.	Carpenter	4	4%
10.	Lecturer	5	5%
11.	Patwaries	6	6%
12.	Advocate	6	6%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100%</b>

#### YOUTH VOLUNTEERS:

With the effective collapse of the state during the first few days of the flood, how then did thousands of trapped people in the valley get rescued, and find relief. The evidence from my interviews, as well as a considerable body of supporting evidence from media, NGO and other observers, points towards the role of impromptu groups of local volunteers in their rescue, and in local NGOs, trusts, and Charitable organizations for relief. Flood victims also spoke of the role of the Indian army and India's National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF), who were active in many areas of Kashmir. The role of the army was in reality limited in relation to the vast scale of the problem at hand. General D.S. Hooda, the northern army commander acknowledged this: The task in Srinagar was too enormous and whatever the relief agencies (army, air force NDRF) could do would still not be enough. This is where we have to acknowledge the efforts of local volunteers who have contributed immensely.

#### THE POLITICS OF FLOOD DISASTER IN KASHMIR:

This paper sought out survivor narratives of the 2014 Kashmir flood to understand their perspectives on the circumstances, and to identify how people have constructed meaning and grasped the disaster and its aftermath. The approach we used was sensitive to the political context of the disaster, and to the way that this disaster in particular was scrutinized by those within and without for its political import.

There are six broad issues that were distilled out. Firstly, despite the historical vulnerability of the Kashmir valley to floods, there was very poor disaster planning or preparedness. As a result, people were evacuated only at the very last minute. Secondly, it revealed the incompetence of the state in responding effectively to the crisis. Thirdly, contrary to the narrative widely circulating in the rest of India, the

Army's role, though not unimportant, was at best modest. Fourthly, the overwhelming majority of people were rescued by local volunteers. Fifthly, people outside Srinagar felt that relief and media attention was unfairly directed at the capital, while people in Srinagar itself felt that tourists and VIPs were prioritized.

Sixthly Kashmiris deeply resented the way that the floods were portrayed on national television media, and viewed it as having exploited their misery. The floods have in that sense provided Kashmiris with further evidence to confirm three widely held beliefs. Firstly, the floods provided evidence that the state

Government is ineffective and that the central government does not priorities them. Secondly, it confirmed widely held perceptions that the Indian media is hostile to them, that it willfully distorts the reality of what happens in Kashmir. Thirdly, it reinforces the belief that their safety and wellbeing rests within elements of Kashmiri society itself.

**MEDIA ACCOUNTS:**

Aside from the collapse of the state administration, and the role of local volunteers, the third most important issue to emerge in flood victim narratives was the role of the media. As with other recent disasters in India, such as the 2013 Uttarakhand floods or Cyclone Phailin in Odisha, television journalism played an essential role in broadcasting the gravity of the disaster and the human suffering to a nationwide audience, helping to mobilize awareness, support and assistance. By holding a critical

lens to the role of government agencies in the relief efforts, the media has also enhanced the transparency and accountability of these institutions in situations of abject crisis. However, in the case of the Kashmir floods, there was a sharp distinction drawn between the roles of the local versus national media. Interviewees spoke positively about the role of the local Srinagar based media, many of whom were working in conditions of grave difficulty and personal adversity. Media played a very positive role during the floods. It was they who kept tracking the developments and helped the government and volunteers steer their operations. There were many instances wherein the media personnel left their work aside and joined hands with the volunteers for the help of people. But this was markedly different from perceptions of the national New Delhi based media. Embedded within army or air force vehicles, national media reported widely on the disaster, but also tended to emphasize the positive contribution of the Indian

armed forces. Media manipulated things and fabricated the truth to show army in good light. But no reporter wanted to wet his feet in water to show the cruel reality and that reality was that the army failed, the system failed. I am not saying that army did nothing, but it did not do what was being reported on TV. Largely as a result of national media coverage, the abiding image of the 2014 floods that the rest of India has been left with is one of Indian army soldiers rescuing desperate, but ultimately ungrateful Kashmiri civilians. In contrast, the abiding impression that Kashmiris have been left with is of a prejudiced national media that grossly distorted the reality at a time to promote the Indian army.

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