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*“An Act of Allah”: Religious Explanations for Floods in Bangladesh as Survival Strategy*

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In countries of the so-called Third World, disaster prevention, preparedness, and relief do not have the expected outcome. Even if people are informed and warned about the arrival of a flood, cyclone, or earthquake, they hesitate to take precautions or leave the area. In some cases, they have to be forced to take refuge in the shelters built for this purpose. They seem to be helpless victims accepting their fate. This is especially the case in Bangladesh, a country which is frequently affected by floods, tornadoes, and cyclones. The affected people, mostly Muslim, regard these hazards as an act of Allah. Through the events He is showing His will and power against which they cannot and should not do anything. In the view of aid agencies, this perception and explanation hampers both external as well as indigenous efforts to survive disasters. However, the findings of my research on local perception and strategies to cope with floods reveal this conception to be a healthy reaction, self-help strategy to overcome crises as quickly as possible and return to daily life. As Allah has given the floods, He will also give believers the strength to survive them. The religious explanation prevents those affected literally wasting time and energy asking why disasters happen to them and not to others.

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Natural Hazards in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a country frequently affected by natural disasters such as earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods. The last big cyclone occurred in April 1991 on the coast of Bangladesh and killed about 140,000 people. People living far away from the shore are not safe from hazards either. Every now and then tornadoes occur such as the one in 1996 which killed several hundred people in the central region of the country. Floods are a more frequent and even regular event in Bangladesh: Every year during the monsoon season from June to September, one third of the country is under water from the snow melt in the Himalayas and heavy rainfall in the country itself. In 1988 and 1998, as much as two thirds of the country were flooded for several weeks, making every fourth Bangladeshi temporarily homeless. From last year’s floods, the Government of Bangladesh claimed about 30 million affected people, 1,000 deaths, 900,000 destroyed homes, 16,000 km (9,920 miles) of damaged roads all over the country, and great harvest losses of rice, the staple food of the Bangladeshis (see the homepage of the Government of Bangladesh: www.bangladeshonline.com/gov/flood98/foreign_1.htm).

During these disasters, the international donor community undertook comprehensive relief and rehabilitation programs, as Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries of the world, cannot cope with the situation without external help. To prevent the impact of natural hazards on the people of Bangladesh, Western donor organizations also concentrate in their normal activities on the development of early warning systems, disaster preparedness, and disaster management projects. Especially after the above-mentioned 1991 cyclone, donor countries focused on the construction of cyclone shelters along the coast. After the 1988 floods, the World Bank launched comprehensive flood control measures all over the country, the so-called “Flood Action Plan” (FAP). About $200 million (U.S.) have been spent in studies and projects to get floods under control (see FPCO 1995).

However, despite these comprehensive programs, the hazards continue to have disastrous effects for the country, especially for the people living in rural areas. The argument that the programs do not reach remote regions loses ground, as even if cyclone shelters are nearby, a considerable proportion of the people do not seek shelter there. Also as far as floods are concerned, the rural people do not seem to take preventive measures to protect themselves and their crops (e.g., by changing to other cultivation techniques and building their houses in flood-proof areas). It seems as if the people have not developed any indigenous strategies to cope with the hazards. The pictures broadcasted by the media confirm the passive attitude of the Bangladeshi people: people standing up to their neck in the water with their arms raised for relief goods, helpless victims of nature and thus fully dependent on external help.

Peoples’ Behavior during Hazards

A range of studies have investigated the poor response to disaster preparedness during as well as after hazards. For example, a study carried out after the cyclone of 1991 found that 95 percent of the households surveyed received the official cyclone warning, but only 17 percent sought shelter before the storm surge. Out of those who did not respond to the warning, only 16 percent said they could not take refuge because they were prevented by high winds and floods. The rest explained that they did not believe that the cyclone would really happen; a few did not understand the warning, and others expressed the fear of looting (Bern et al. 1993). Another study revealed that, even where people drew on their indigenous knowledge to warn themselves about cyclones by observing natural phenomena, only a few people took precautions to protect themselves (International Voluntary Services/CCDB 1994). To another study team, people stated that they felt the existing cyclone shelters were unsafe or unpleasant and were unwilling to go to them until the water was in their yard (Chowdhury et al. 1993). This is most obvious for women. Statistics reveal that the mortality rates from the 1991 cyclone were relatively high among women and children. Studies focusing on the gender aspect found that women hesitate to leave the homestead for the official shelter due to the Muslim culture of purdah which requires women not to show themselves to strangers (Bern et al. 1993; Haider 1992; Kabir 1995). Thus leaving the homestead and staying together in a shelter with males unknown to her and her family not only makes her feel uncomfortable, but also has a negative impact on her status in the family and kinship group. In public buildings such as flood shelters women fear the lack of privacy (Shaw 1992). Statements about the people drawing on religion are most prevalent regarding floods and erosion, which is another major hazard in
Bangladesh. The Brahmaputra alone, called the Jamuna in Bangladesh, renders 30,000 people every year home- and land-less (EGIS 1997), aside from the people living on its numerous islands. A case study carried out in the middle reach of the Jamuna river found that about 35 percent of the people affected by erosion explain it to be the “Will of Allah” (Haque 1991, p. 197). Asked about how they would respond to erosion, about 20 percent replied “to pray to Allah” (Haque 1991, p. 206). The rural people seem to have a fatalistic attitude towards hazards and in interviews refer to Allah who would decide upon their destiny. Also higher levels of the society such as politicians express the view that the only means they have to fight the hazard is to pray to Allah. Referring to Allah is thus a standard answer in Bangladesh, where 87 percent of the population are Muslims.

**Case Study: The Char-Dwellers of the Jamuna River**

**Approach**

Confronting people with questions about their coping strategies before a hazard occurs, or asking them afterwards why they were so passive, does not give a clear picture about the poor response of the local people to warnings, as the questioner depends fully on what the affected people tell him—how they reconstruct the event and their behavior. Moreover, it is possible that people cannot easily give clear answers about which strategies they undertook in order to survive a disaster, as traumatic stress has a considerable impact on the human mind. Thus, in order to gain insight into the reasons behind the choice of a certain behavior, the researcher has to be present during a hazard. Taking this consideration into account, I spent altogether four flood seasons in Bangladesh, among them the so-called “floods of the century” of 1998 during August and September. The study methods were based on participant observation in combination with formal and informal interviews, group discussions, and the collection of life stories. The area of research was one of the most affected by the floods, the above mentioned islands of the Jamuna river.

**Area of Research**

The Jamuna river during monsoon season becomes up to 20 km (about 12.5 miles) wide and places a large part of its numerous islands under water. About 2.3 million people live on these islands, locally called chars. As in the rest of Bangladesh, most of them are Muslims. Flooding, however, is not the only hazard they have to face. Another one, the char-people even say a more serious one, is erosion. Every year during the flood season chars are partly or fully washed away whereas in other places new land appears. On average, a char is only four years old, and only 10 percent of the chars are stable for more than 20 years (EGIS 1997, p. iv). However, despite these extreme living conditions, the char-dwellers do not leave for the mainland, be it temporarily or forever. They try to stay as long as possible in their home during high floods and in the case of erosion, dismantle it and transport it to another char which is less or not affected by floods and erosion at that moment. A study (ISPAN 1995) confirms these observations: Only 6 percent of the char-people leave their chars forever, which is much below the country-wide norm of leaving their home villages in the countryside for the cities (ISPAN 1995, p. 3–14). Several studies in the late 1980s tried to find out the reasons why people living along the Jamuna river and on the chars decide not to leave for safer areas when they are affected by floods or erosion and suggested that they must have developed a range of coping strategies (Elahi, Ahmed, and Mafizuddin 1991).

**The Outsiders’ Impression: The Char-Dwellers as Fatalists**

However, the studies did not focus on the particular techniques which the people applied, but rather on their lamenting about their desperate situations they had of losing their land and goods to the river. Thus, they came to the conclusion that the riverine people behave passively towards floods and erosion and only developed some “adjustment strategies” which enable them to live on the chars and the banks of the Jamuna (Haque 1988, 1991). They would undertake “corrective type of responses at individual levels rather than preventative measures” (Haque 1991, p. 199). A large part of those were “incidental” rather than “purposeful” adjustment strategies.

When asked about the reasons for the hazards and possibilities to mitigate them, the people referred to the domain of religion: Hazards
are the act of Allah, and the only way they can respond to that is to pray. Out of these observations it is comprehensible that the members of the mentioned study come to the conclusion that the "... acceptance of loss and a fatalistic view toward the hazard appear to be the dominant features in the human adjustment system" (Haque 1988, p. 434). Abdul Baqee (1998), who has conducted research on the chars of another major river, denotes all char-people as “fatalists; they believe that all their intense sufferings are divinely ordained. In their loss of hearth and home, they inevitably see the unseen hand of Allah” (Baquée 1998, p. 217).

The above mentioned studies, however, did not investigate the reasons for this obvious passive behavior and view of hazards. My research has shown that it makes a big difference regarding the results of a study if you ask people about their coping strategies after hazards, or if you spend this time of hardship with them. When I asked the char-people in a standard questionnaire about their coping strategies in the dry season, that is to say, when no erosion and floods occur, I got answers similar to those in the studies mentioned above (Schmuck-Widmann 1999):

“What shall we do? We cannot do anything against this. It is all Allah’s will what happens to us and we have to obey it.”

“It is the Almighty who decides about these events—if the flood is high and if our homestead is eroded. There is no reason for us to try to do something.”

“Floods and erosion, all these kind of events, are an act of Allah. We have to accept His decisions.”

Rhetoric and the Reality behind It

Especially in nonliterate societies, there is a big difference between what people say and what they actually do. Several studies investigating farmers’ agricultural techniques in hazardous environments have revealed that indigenous knowledge and coping strategies are to a large part non-verbal and thus cannot be expressed in words. They are intrinsically combined with practice (e.g., Chambers, Pacey, and Thrupp 1989; Hobart 1993a; Richards 1986, 1993). This refers also to the char-people; according to my own observations more than 80 percent are illiterate and thus keep no written records of events and their behavior during that time.

When I was staying on the chars during the floods of 1998, the people were doing everything other than passively accepting their fate. They were not sitting in the mosque or in their homes praying to Allah, nor waiting for the government and NGOs to distribute relief goods. Rather, they were undertaking several measures to make the best out of the situation and to secure the return to daily life afterwards. They knew perfectly well that the only means to survive lies in their own hands. Consequently, they followed strategies which have proven efficient for generations: they built platforms out of reeds and banana shoots for their animals, fixed their large wooden bed just below the roof, and cooked on portable ovens which every household has made during the dry season for this case. They lived on the stocks of food they had preserved from the winter harvest and temporarily switched to income sources other than agriculture, expecting their crops to be severely damaged. In addition, they could refer to their wide networks of relatives established for the purpose of mutual help and solidarity in crisis situations. At the same time, they expressed their faith to Allah, interpreting the high floods as His means to test their belief in His almighty power and at the same time demonstrating this power.

From these observations, I conclude the following: by referring to Allah as the one who can decide on everything, the char-people want to express that, though they can cope well with the situation alone, Allah is and will always be the one who has the "last word." Moreover, by saying that everything is in the hand of Allah, they avoid becoming desperate and feeling lost. Because it is He who had sent the floods, He will take them away and take care of His believers. The faith and trust in Allah has proven a successful strategy as up to now they have managed to survive floods as well as erosion. Standard questionnaires as well as informal interviews carried out since 1994 have shown that the mortality rate during floods is not higher than during the rest of the year. Nobody I have talked to could name one person who had drowned in the floods (Schmuck-Widmann 1996, 1999).3

The explanations of the char-people for floods reflect that they do not consider Allah’s will as the only cause. Normal floods are welcomed as a gift of Allah, because they fertilize and irrigate their fields and kill pests. In 1998 some people wondered if Allah wanted to punish them, though they did not know the reason as they follow the rules and recommendations given in the Koran. However, the same person referring
to Allah as the one deciding upon a strength of flood gave other reasons for the event: Too much rainfall inside Bangladesh and extraordinary hot weather conditions which caused an extreme snowmelt in the Himalayas. Also human activities are seen as causes for heavy flooding: Embankments and sluice gates along the Jamuna river prevent the waters running freely and thus confront the chars with high water levels. Considering these explanations which lie beyond their scope of influence, it is very plausible that the char-dwellers perceive themselves as victims—be it of the acts of nature, of engineers, or of Allah. To refer to higher powers to explain hazards is also a common phenomenon in Western societies. In Europe and the United States, engineers are nowadays often blamed for floods, because by their structures they have acted against the will of the river. During floods, people tend to wait for the government to take action. As in Bangladesh, people do not seek shelter when they receive a warning, but rather have to be forced out of their houses by the police and army. A good example is the floods of the Oder River on the border between Germany and Poland in July 1997 (Twigg 1998).

Conclusion

For the outsider, the rural people in Bangladesh seem to be helpless victims of hazards, accepting them as an act of Allah. Through the events He demonstrates His will and power against which they cannot and should not do anything. In the view of aid agencies, this perception and explanation hamper both external as well as indigenous efforts to survive disasters.

However, the study during floods among people who are affected by hazards such as floods and erosion more than anybody else has revealed that this conception is a healthy reaction, and therefore is a self-help strategy to overcome crises as quickly as possible and return to daily life. As Allah has given the floods, He will also give believers the strength to survive them. The religious explanation prevents those affected from literally wasting time and energy asking why disasters happen to them and not to others. Studies investigating the reasons for poor responses to early warnings and the existing disaster relief projects should not draw conclusions from statements gathered from people after the hazard by standard questionnaires and disqualify them as fatalists due to their belief in Allah. If the conditions and the strength of the hazards allows, researchers should spend the period of hardship with the people and observe their actions and perception. Then disasters preparedness and relief programs might become more effective and be able to support and encourage the people not to despair.

Notes

1. For a good overview see Twigg (1998), from which the following examples are drawn.
2. The numbers given above on the death toll of the 1998 floods do not differentiate between the floods being a direct or indirect reason. Many deaths occurring during high water levels are due to snake bites, electric shocks caused by badly installed electricity in urban areas, and road and boat accidents.
3. This is reported by several newspaper articles on floods in Western countries. The studies by Ian Burton and Robert Kates (1964) as well as Anthony Giddens (1990) have especially inspired me to make this comparison.

References

EGIS (Environment and GIS Support Project for Water Sector


