

## SUFFERING AND HEALING AMONG THE SURVIVORS OF BHUJ EARTHQUAKE

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*The use of diagnostic category of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has not been very useful across cultures as it is based on the western cultural discourse that stress is an outcome of loss of control over nature. This paper provides a glimpse of suffering and healing among the survivors of earthquake that occurred in Bhuj on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2001. An ethnographic approach was used for this study conducted in rural and urban areas of Bhuj. It was found that a faith of the people that discharging their duties (karma) would lead them to peace and harmony with nature has resulted in better healing among the survivors in rural areas than among those in urban areas where life is guided mainly by the materialistic goals. It is proposed that suffering and healing help to understand culturally and historically rooted victimhood of the survivors better than PTSD.*

**KEY WORDS: BELIEF SYSTEMS; HEALING; SUFFERING; THEORY OF KARMA**

The earthquake which occurred in Gujarat on 26 January 2001 has accounted for about 20 thousand deaths out of which about 18.5 thousand deaths have occurred in Bhuj district itself\*. Also, it has not only damaged the material belongings, assets and physical health of the survivors but has also severely affected their psychological well-being. This study was an endeavor to understand the problems and formulate some kind of a programme of psychological rehabilitation for the survivors of the disaster. This paper reports a preliminary study undertaken by the author.

The research literature on the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) provides an account of the generalized symptoms which points towards the psychological

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effects, particularly of violence, natural disaster, etc., on the survivors (Barlow & Durand, 1995; Lazarus, 2000; Suar, Mandal & Khuntia, 2002). The available literature shows that socio-cultural belief systems and the processes of suffering and healing are closely linked (Anand *et al.*, 2002; Dalal, 1999, 2001; Kakar, 1982; Klienman, 1980, 1988; Misra & Varma, 1999; Palsane, 1990; Stacy, 1988; Suar *et al.*, 2002).

Against this backdrop a study was conducted between November 2001 and January 2002 as the first phase of an ongoing research. It aimed at studying the subjective experiences of suffering and healing amongst the survivors of Bhuj earthquake. In addition the role of cultural beliefs as factors influencing suffering and healing processes were also looked into. Finally, the significance of support networks in the healing process was explored.

### METHOD

#### *Participants*

Among the survivors, the data were collected at three levels, i.e., *individual, family, and community.*

For this purpose, data were collected from 20 families of Selari village and Bhachau town of earthquake-affected Bhuj district of Gujrat. These two areas in Bhuj also differed considerably in the degree of loss of life and material property.

### Procedure

The study adopted multiple strategies. Figure 1 provides a brief description of how the methodology evolved in the field. Apart from the narrative accounts of the people, the reports in the local newspapers and periodicals regarding the effects of the earthquake were obtained and analyzed. Participant observation of socio-cultural activities provided further insight into socio-cultural belief systems of the people in the community.

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Semi-structured interview (addressing major objectives of the study) of one key respondent (Vitthal Das Baba, a priest of Selari village) and adult members of the families where at least one death had occurred due to the earthquake



A focused group discussion among the adult members of the families where no death had occurred - (a) to study their experiences and conceptualization of 'suffering' and 'healing' and (b) to get a feedback from them whether they followed the Karma philosophy.



Semi-structured interviews of the 'experienced' people of Kuchchh (e.g., creative writers, journalists, social workers etc.), who could understand the psyche of the people before and after the earthquake, were conducted to address the issue - the extent to which the process of 'suffering' and 'healing' among the survivors were influenced by the Karma philosophy.



An attempt was made to understand the process of 'suffering' and 'healing' among the survivors of an urban earthquake-affected area (Bhachau) where, presumably, lives of people were not guided by Karma philosophy. To achieve this goal, a study was planned with the help of semi-structured interviews of about 20 such families where deaths had occurred and focused group discussion among local people actively engaged in the process of rehabilitation of their town.

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Fig. 1 The Evolution of Methodology

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Major patterns that emerged during the study in the field are presented in the following sections.

### Experiences of Suffering and Healing

#### *The Discourse of 'Karma' in rural areas*

The interview with Vitthal Das Baba (a priest of the Selari village and one of the key informants) was of much value in this study as it not only provided insights into the issues related with the research but also, gave rise to certain questions, which, in turn, initiated an evolution in the methodology, which were applied in the field. During the course of the interview he said

"According to me, the earthquake occurs because gases get accumulated inside the earth and it has to come out due to pressure. But the gases get accumulated inside the earth due to the result of our Karma. Tell me, who saved us (pointing towards himself and Bharat Bhai, the interpreter) from the earthquake? It was nothing but our Karma. If people lead their lives according to Dharma - and by Dharma I mean Manava Dharma, which is above all caste, religion and community - they will achieve Anand (joy). If they don't do it, they will suffer."

Not only from these words of Vitthal Das Baba, but also from those of the family members of the dead ones (20 such families) it was quite evident that the notions of 'suffering' and 'healing' were constructed and experienced around their 'theory of Karma'. Their 'theory of Karma' centred on the following themes:

- a) *Exercising one's potentialities to the fullest.* Almost all the men of those families where one or more deaths had occurred were back to their work after one or two months. Among them were men like Narsingh Bhai, Megha Bhai, Kheema Bhai and Ramesh Bhai who belonged to those families where two or three deaths had occurred.

- b) *Diffusion of the boundaries between the self and other 'beings' of nature.* Thus, action should be oriented towards the welfare of not only the self but also the other 'beings' of nature.
- c) *Possessing only that amount of material property that is required for 'healthy' but non-luxurious living.*

During the days of scarcity two or three days after the earthquake, despite suffering a death in the family and having a poor economic condition, Vasta Bhai distributed whole of his stored *Bajra* (a cereal) to the homeless wanderers. Parma Bhai, a simple farmer who had lost her 13-year-old daughter in the earthquake, built a bus stop in the village with the money he had received as compensation for her death.

- d) *Forces of nature (which cause happiness and sorrow to human beings) are beyond the control of human beings.* Also, how much these forces oppress a human being depends on the nature and intensity of wrong deeds of his/her past and present lives. Through exercising one's potentialities to the fullest in this present life to live in harmony with the forces of nature, one can rise above these forces and merge with the Paramatma (Almighty) to get rid of the cycle of life and death.

The narratives of Vitthal Das Baba and the adult members of the *affected* families show that there is a realization among them about – (a) the transitoriness of emotions and their causes, and (b) their duty or *Karma* or *Pravrutti* being the only permanent truth of their life. One such prevalent saying in the village is: "*Sukhma hasvun nahin, dukhma radvun nahin*"

It means, one should not laugh during happiness and cry during sorrow; pointing out the transitoriness of such emotions.

Another saying, which is prevalent among the villagers and points out the important position of *Karma* in their life, is:

"*Bhutkal no bhuli jao, bhavishya ni chinta nahin karo, vartmaan ma pravrutti karo*"

It means, forget the past, do not worry about the future and perform your duties in present (so that one can do one's best to bring about 'harmony' in and around himself/herself).

The fact that the notions of 'suffering' and 'healing' in villages are constructed and experienced around *their* 'theory of *Karma*' has facilitated the healing process in the families studied. The emotional (depression and avoidance of recollection of the disastrous event), cognitive (attribution of cause of the event and cognitive reconstruction of the event), behavioural (restarting the work for earning livelihood and usual household activities) and social (participation in religious and social activities) aspects of the healing were studied. It was found that the psychological impact is deep and serious only in 10% of the families. Energies of people in these families are put in a positive direction, as they were back to work after one or two months of the disaster. Also, importantly, the 'theory of *Karma*' has probably facilitated *cognitive reconstruction* of the events leading to suffering as they attribute the causes and consequences of the earthquake to their or their community's 'wrong' *Karma* and they have realized that by performing their *Karma* or *Pravrutti* (duties), they can bring about 'harmony' within and around themselves.

During the interviews with the key respondents and the members of the *affected* families, another salient pattern emerged that especially in those families, where no or only material destruction had taken, there was a tendency to accumulate in great amount the relief materials which they didn't even need (e.g., food items, cloths, tents, pouches of mineral water etc.) were accumulated by those families which didn't suffer any loss of life or material property. Such a phenomenon persisted even 8 – 10 months after the earthquake had occurred. The families, which were interviewed, took this social phenomenon in their stride by quoting the following popular saying of their culture:

"*Sukan bhedo leeloo pan hadi jay*"

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It means, that along with dried leaves (which readily catch fire), green leaves also get burnt. From this saying, they drew the analogy for their present life condition. They expressed that children and 'good' elderly people who were among the casualties, did not commit *Paap* ('wrong' deeds according the theory of *Karma*). It was due to the 'wrong' deeds of the people in general (who are now represented by those people who undeservedly are accumulating the relief material) that even those innocent souls had to depart from this world. But, such a phenomenon (that even after such disaster, only a few people are actually following the 'theory of *Karma*' around which their lives and the cultural discourses revolve) raised certain questions:

Even after sharing the cultural discourse that the 'wrong' *Karma* has led to the natural disasters in the past, what makes them not to *practice* their own discourse?

In the culture of Selari village and Kuchchh, are there some other socio-cultural belief systems underlying their constructions and experiences of 'suffering' and 'healing'?

By that time, I had already spent about one month in the village and I could see the feasibility of holding a focussed group discussion as a number of villagers had started interacting with me and taking me in confidence. Thus, with the help of Amrit Bhai, I was able to conduct a focused group discussion involving 12 men on 20<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2001.

Most of the participants in the discussion expressed that the natural disasters that have been hitting Kuchchh (cyclone and draught apart from the recent earthquake) are a result of their becoming self-centred and not following *Karma* properly. There was a general agreement that they had taken 'more' relief material than what they required and share the guilt that it could well be the reason for some natural disaster in future. The discussion ended on a positive note as the group realized and expressed that getting involved in some positive and constructive work they would attempt to overcome the guilt they had.

### Materialism and Suffering & Healing

Although the semi-structured interviews of the 'experienced' people of Kuchchh (e.g., creative writers, journalists, social workers etc.), who could understand the psyche of the people before and after the earthquake, were being conducted to address the major objectives of the study, this new pressing issue was also included among the other issues, i.e., the extent to which the constructions and experiences of 'suffering' and 'healing' among the survivors were influenced by the theory of *Karma*. This process of interviewing the 'knowledgeable' people of the field was based on a similar procedure undertaken by Lifton (1967) to understand the nuances of psychological impact of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the survivors.

A salient pattern emerged out of these interviews: the lives of rural people were guided by the theory of *Karma* and that urban people was guided by materialistic goals in life. Mr. Haresh Dholakia, an author and a columnist in the newspaper, Kuchchhmitra, stated that people in the urban areas of Kuchchh were in a habit of leading luxurious lives without making much efforts for that. Therefore, after the loss of material properties in the earthquake, it was very difficult for the survivors to recover from the deep and severe impact on their psyche because they are still passive (as it used to be their life style), as Dholakia (2001) points out in his book, *G-paanch thi G-shunya taraf*, "Jelli aaskit moti, tetlun dukh motu laage chhe...." They do not work or do something constructive which may channelize their energies in some positive direction, which makes their overcoming the depression very difficult.

Mr. Maoji Maheshwari, another author and a columnist in the newspaper, Kuchchhmitra, clearly stated that the conceptualization of 'happiness' is deeply influenced by materialism. According to him, "The earthquake has been successful in removing the mask, provided by the civilization, from the faces of the people.... The castles of happiness which people had created have sadly fallen down and they are experiencing a deep sense of emptiness and loss which have totally shattered their rhythm of life." He pointed

out that the psychological recovery in the villages is quite faster than that in the urban areas because the rural people are still somewhere believe in the *Karma* philosophy. He quoted an example of a village in Mandvi Taluka where all the 365 houses, which were destroyed in the earthquake, got reconstructed with the help of villagers' own labour much before the rainy season so that they could engage in farming.

Mr. J. N. Joshi, Director, All India Radio, Bhuj, stated, "*Maya hi maat ka karan bani hai*". It means, running blindly after the material gains has caused such a disaster for the people and they, unfortunately, have still not learnt a lesson from that. He stated that it is very much known to the people of Kuchchh that this place had been prone to earthquakes in the past. There are names of villages, which signifies this. For example, the name of a village is, Ludai, which means 'to swing'. Still, multi-storeyed buildings were made here. The literature about the culture of Kuchchh also indicates the worthlessness of materialism, as one revered saint of Kuchchh, Maikan Dada is quoted in Melita (1994) as saying, "Why do you keep shouting, 'money, money'? That is as worthless as dust. Ultimately, we all have to become a part of this soil." The tendency to gain more and more without actually deserving for that has created a deep sense of loss in the minds of the sufferers after the losses of material properties and lives have taken place here.

Mr. Dinesh Bhai Sanghvi, the chairman Gram Swaraj Sangh (an NGO) indicated the influence of materialism, on the lives people. Further, to elaborate on the nature of such an influence, he quoted the following *shloka* from the epic Mahabharata:

*"Jaanaami dharmam nachamev pravritti  
Jaanaami adharmam nachamev nivritti"*

It means, I know the right path but I do not follow it; I know the wrong path but I do not leave it. He stated that people, in general, could distinguish between right and wrong path but under the influence of materialism (especially in the urban areas), they have created miseries in their own lives.

The interviews with the members of 18 families (in which at least one death had taken place) in

Bhachau town also showed quite a similar pattern as far as the state of suffering of people was concerned.

As far as the psychological impact of the earthquake is concerned, emotional (depression and avoidance of recollection of the disastrous event), cognitive (attribution of cause of the event and cognitive reconstruction of the event), behavioural (restarting the work for earning livelihood and usual household activities) and social (participation in religious and social activities) aspects were studied. Among the members of 18 families, not much improvement was found in these aspects of the psychological impact 11 months after the earthquake had taken place. It was found that the psychological impact was deep and serious in 70-80% of the families whereas the families under such critical psychological state were only 10% of that under study in the rural areas.

#### *Reflections: A Personal Note*

I was filled with a sense of gratitude towards the people of Selari with whom I could learn the possible ways of dealing with disasters in life. Also, I was carrying some guilt in my mind for I could not interact much with a few women victims, as I was unable to empathize with the nature and intensity of trauma they were facing in their lives. After coming back to Delhi, while reflecting back on my fieldwork in Kuchchh with one of my teachers, I could realize what Das (1992) meant by 'non-narratability' of death. I remember myself sitting in the house of a lady, Kuvar Ben, of middle age whose husband had expired in the earthquake and had no children. At that time an ex-sarpanch (a relative of hers) and Amrit Bhai (acting as my interpreter) were sitting with me. After an interaction with the ex-sarpanch about whether she had received the amount of compensation, I tried to initiate an interaction with her by asking her about the work she was engaging in these days. After a silence of about 2 minutes, she slowly uttered a sentence which meant, "something..., I do something." Then tears came in her eyes and neither she nor we spoke for about more than 10 minutes. With tears in our eyes, I indicated, after this silence, to Amrit Bhai to tell her to take rest and we would

come again to meet her. She responded, out of her commitment towards her guests, that we would have to take tea, which she went to prepare. Reflecting back on the this encounter I could realize what Rosaldo (1993, p. 20) has said, "...one-line explanations can be vacuous or pithy. The concept of force calls attention to an enduring intensity in human conduct that can occur with or without the dense elaboration conventionally associated with cultural depth." The intensity and nature of pain that that one sentence of Kubar Ben contained, all I could experience was, much greater than any intensity of pain I have faced in my life till now. I confess that it was extremely difficult for me to empathize with the pain she was undergoing.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion it may be said that the psychological impact of the earthquake on the people and the associated healing process was found to be different in rural and urban areas. Four important reasons could be identified for such a difference:

- a) Belief systems associated with nature (harmony with nature).
- b) Faith in one's *Karma*.
- c) Cohesiveness among and support from the community members.
- d) Feeling of collective loss.

In general, first three reasons helped the rural families to come out of the grief. On the other hand, in urban areas, instead of having a feeling of living in harmony with nature, there has been a tendency of having control over nature and other material goods. Therefore, the loss of life and property due to earthquake has created a feeling of 'deprivation' or 'emptiness' among the people of urban areas. Apart from this, in urban areas, the social life is different from that in the rural areas. Unlike in rural areas, time and affiliation for the relatives were found to be less in the urban areas, probably due to which the process of sharing the pain has been slow.

In rural areas, the commitment of people to their *Karma* was found to be helpful in facing the natural disaster. Generally, in the rural areas, people's energies have been put in a positive direction, as they had to be busy in farming. Ladies in such families devoted their time and energy in their work, which has helped them in moving towards a healthy mental condition. Thus, generally, it could be observed in the rural areas that *their* theory of *Karma* has helped the survivors in the process of 'healing'; and maintaining harmony with nature, which Markus and Kitayama (1991), Misra (1994) and Misra and Gergen (1993) have emphasized as an important theme in the discourse of non western cultures of south Asia.

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