

Post-Quake Recovery in Urban Kachchh

Socio-economic changes in Kachchh after the 2002 Gujarat earthquake have had a negative impact on the survivors. This has been sharpened by class and caste distinctions in the distribution of compensation which have significantly affected the healing process. This economic divide has also caused the collapse of the social support network, which has further aggravated the sense of estrangement and vulnerability.

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The devastating earthquake that hit Kachchh¹ on January 26, 2001 claimed about 1,22,000² lives. The aftermath of the quake caused enormous socio-economic changes, which have posed a threat to the survivors' recovery from trauma. This study looks at the extent of restoration of 'normalcy' for survivors, especially in the urban areas of Kachchh.

Among psychologists and social scientists, Stacy (1988) strongly advocates the incorporation of 'culture-sensitive' concepts that may examine the beliefs and practices in the domain of health and illness. It would necessitate the use of terms and concepts that are not tied specifically to the organisations, institutions, or ideologies of a particular time and place.

In accordance with the culture-sensitive conceptualisation of terms in the domain of health and illness, the term 'suffering' here means the experience of pain or agony in crisis situations, which is assumed to be 'shaped' by one's cultural belief systems on illness and health [Klienman 1988; Palsane 1990]. Also, 'healing' is conceptualised as gradual recovery from such an experience of pain or agony.

The study was planned a few months after the quake. It explored the subjective experiences of suffering and healing of the survivors, the role of cultural beliefs as factors influencing these experiences and their social constructions, and the significance of support networks (family, relatives, community or social group) in the healing process within the socio-economic context after the earthquake.

An ethnographic approach was followed in this longitudinal study of three phases (after one, two and three years of the disaster), in which survivors of around 20 families of Selari village and Bhachau town participated.

The duration of each phase was about two months. Ethnography as a methodology constitutes a set of methods. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews of the participants led to new research concerns and set forth the evolution of methodology [Priya 2002]. Focused group discussions among the villagers and semi-structured interviews of journalists, writers and social workers followed. Articles in local newspapers were analysed for triangulation and other relevant information.

Four dimensions of the processes of suffering and healing were explored. These were emotional (grief and feelings), cognitive (attribution and cognitive reconstruction of suffering), behavioural (restarting work and usual household activities), and social (participation in social and religious activities).

Before understanding the psychological impact of the earthquake, we study the post-earthquake socio-economic changes, which constituted the context of suffering and healing.

In the wake of such a huge disaster, people discarded the boundaries of caste and class and helped each other in whatever way they could – by pulling bodies out of the rubble or consoling each other by staying as a collective in open or under tents. Maheshwari (2002) has indicated that such social conditions lasted much longer in rural areas than in urban areas, after the quake.

Priya (2002:109) mentions the guilt, among the adult males at Selari, of grabbing more relief materials than they required. Khatri (2002) wrote several editorials (in the local newspaper, *Kutchmitra*) imploring the people not to forget the generosity and honesty strongly associated with Kachchhi character.

Over the past three years, gradually, the norms and ethics of the social lives of

people have been resuming their pre-earthquake positions. Men and women have had to return to the roles they had before the earthquake. Importantly, new challenges of social adjustment have been posed to widows, due to the social norms allowing younger widows to remarry and creating social isolation for older widows.

Apart from the participants in the study, Thakkar (2001) and Maheshwari (2002) among other journalists and authors have noted that the corrupt practices of government-appointed 'assessors' of loss of life and property have upset many people. The delay in town planning for the permanent resettlement of housing has created further discontent and frustration among urban survivors.

Let us now try to understand, in urban Kachchh, the dynamics of constructions, experiences and the support networks associated with suffering and healing.

Nature and Intensity of Suffering

Dholakia (2001:2) gives a clear indication of the growth of the materialist culture, particularly in the urban areas of Kachchh, in the last two decades due to the steady increase of capitalist forces in the region. He has emphasised that such a culture is marked by longing for more and more luxury and passivity towards labour. Priya (2002) has described the general construction of happiness and health in the urban areas of Kachchh, on the basis of the interviews conducted with several authors, journalists and social workers as 'having material properties and illness-free bodies'. J N Joshi, director, All India Radio, Bhuj, said the people of Kuchchh knew that the place was prone to earthquakes. There are even names of villages that signifies this. For example, the name of one village is Ludai, which means 'to swing'. Still, multi-storeyed buildings were constructed there.

In the first phase of the study, Priya (2002) looked at the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and social aspects of the psychological impact on 18 families. It was found that the psychological impact was deep and serious in 70-80 per cent of the families. Almost a year had passed after the earthquake when the first phase of the study was begun, but it was very difficult for the people to contain their emotions during our interaction as most of the participants talked about the 'emptiness' in their lives after the loss of family members and property. It could be observed

that there was a lack of motivation and willingness among people to carry out their roles in their families. Addressing such a 'stagnation' in their lives, Dholakia (2001:5) points out in his book, *G-paanch thi G-shunya taraf*, 'Jetli aaskit moti, tetlun dukh motu laage chhe', meaning, "the greater the 'stagnation', more will be the intensity of sadness or depression". Only two men participating in the study reported to have 'sometimes' gone out to earn or run their small business. Social and religious activities (such as bhajans, satsang or collective prayers) were very infrequent but even these were not well-attended. Urban life had not provided the people with any constructive philosophy or belief system about life to lead them to a 'cognitive reconstruction' of the trauma faced by them. Although the temporary resettlement colonies where they lived were based on a particular caste or community, they generally lacked the feeling of togetherness or similarity of 'loss' suffered in the earthquake, perhaps because of their conditioning in the *individualistic* patterns of urban life.

Two years after the quake, the state of suffering of the participants remained more or less the same. In 10 of the 16 families, not

much improvement was found in the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and social aspects, since the first phase of the study. One change that did come about in some of the men was their serious interest in the social comparison of the money received as 'compensation' from the government. A marginal improvement in the behavioural and emotional aspects of some of the participants could be noted in the third phase of the study, as they had started paying attention to their present-life situation. Some of the male members were trying to involve themselves in their work. Some people (particularly mothers) were able to attain 'peace of mind' due to the birth of a child as it provided them with an avenue for projection and feedback of positive emotions as a result of genuinely relating with their child.

Importantly, the second and third phases of the study found two unique patterns among the survivors existing simultaneously. In most families, it was mainly the male members who were frustrated with the fact that they were living in economic deprivation, as all their material property had been destroyed and they did not receive the 'relief package' they had been promised by the government. But

along with this frustration, there was an apathy towards the members of their own family and community. Therefore, the grief of other survivors has found inadequate space for catharsis and further recovery. Thus, in the three years after the quake, the nature of suffering has altered as several socio-economic changes in the region have added estrangement to loss-induced grief.

Community Divide

In an interview with a journalist from a local newspaper in the first phase of the study, it was revealed that concern for other people was alive among the survivors till the time that relief material from all over the world arrived in the post-earthquake scenario. Due to poor management and distribution of these relief materials on a caste and community basis, the journalist said, this concern began to dissipate. Maheshwari (2002) has indicated that the distribution of relief materials along caste lines has led to an implicit 'community divide', which has a telling effect on the healing process. He and Thakkar (2002) also mentioned that due to the inaction of the authorities and insensitive

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and corrupt officers there were gross irregularities in the assessment of loss of property and distribution of relief-packages. This has resulted in the survivors experiencing a strong feeling of intra-community and intra-caste 'economic divide'.

The author's interviews with the participants and Maheshwari (2002) have also indicated quarrels within families over the distribution of the package. The 'economic divide' has thus severely damaged the social support network. In addition, Joshi (2003) has called for immediate initiatives from the government and non-government organisations to tackle the frequent quarrels among the youth of various castes, who are largely illiterate and unemployed.

According to Mead (1913, 1934), cited in Sahakian (1982), the perception of what family members and related people might think about him/her generates a sense of selfhood in a person. Severed social relationships due to the economic divide has resulted in loss of selfhood or estrangement among the survivors.

Sexual Aberrance

During the second and third phases of the study it was noted that male youths engaged in unrestrained behaviour, loitering around residential areas without doing any work (sometimes in a drunken state), eve-teasing and quarrelling. Not only in Bhachau but in other devastated towns of Kachchh too, aberrant behaviour of male youth, including pre-marital and extra-marital sex, has been noted. Navin Joshi, who works for the local daily, *Kutchmitra*, indicates that investigation in two of four devastated towns has revealed such behaviour. He also mentions his interview with a gynaecologist in Bhuj in which she admitted that in the post-earthquake period, there was a sharp increase in the cases of abortion [Joshi 2003].

It comes as a shock to note that women who are left with no earning males in the family have been forced into the flesh trade. The prevailing socio-economic conditions have in general forced women into sexual victimhood. There are 'other' ways in which the post-earthquake period has produced challenges for women. The money received by the families as 'compensation' has resulted in a lack of interest among the males to earn their livelihood. In some cases, it has also resulted in excessive expenditure on addictions like drinking, and the mother or wife usually bears the brunt of such behaviour.

Even worse is the plight of widows who have remarried and of women who are married to a man who had lost his wife. Under the prevailing situation of 'freestyle lives of males' it is they who have to adjust to the demands of the new family they have joined.

Szasz (1960) has located mental illness in the socio-cultural milieu, where the symptoms are a communication of the struggle between one's experiences and the social and cultural ethics. It is important to note that the suffering of most of these women and widows has been aggravated by the prevailing socio-economic conditions that have provided neither the safety and security needed for survival nor a space for the emotions one associates with having a healthy family life.

It is clear from this discussion that intense grief, avoidance of the recall of the event and the estrangement induced by socio-economic changes among survivors in urban areas have impeded the process of cognitive appraisal and acceptance of suffering. Brison (1997), cited in Ellingson (2001), Dalal (1999) and Kohli and Dalal (1998) assert that the acceptance of suffering is the first step towards its cognitive reconstruction and a process of healing.

Very few such cases have indeed been found during this study at Bhachau, where families have accepted their loss. In the case of Himmatt Bhai, the acceptance of grief is reflected in a small poem written below the photographs of his dead wife and son kept in their one-room temporary house.

In case of Shankar Bhai, who lost four family members, including a son and daughter, he and his wife have found solace in caring for their only surviving child, a visually handicapped girl. Some survivors like Shankar Bhai have been able to symbolically express and receive the feedback of positive emotions blocked after the death of their loved ones. But these examples are of a few individual efforts of survivors to recover from the trauma amidst wrecked support networks.

Taking a close look at the process of suffering and healing in urban Kachchh since the quake, one may be startled by the negative impact of changing socio-economic conditions. This has posed serious challenges to the healing process (already delayed due to their experience of 'emptiness' or 'loss') among survivors. But it is clear that in the social structure as observed while analysing the notions of happiness and health in urban Kachchh, the same materialism and capitalism which guides the global socio-economic order

has vfound expression in the values of survivors. **EW**

Notes

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- 1 Kachchh is one of the districts of Gujarat. It is also spelt as 'Kutch' or 'Kuchchh'. Although Bhuj is the district-headquarters of Kachchh, this recent earthquake has frequently been quoted in literature as Bhuj earthquake.
- 2 Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority.

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