

Kashmir Deluge

Natural Disaster Made Worse

GAUTAM NAVLAKHA

The floods that overwhelmed Jammu and Kashmir last month were a terrifying natural disaster on their own without the civilian government or the military authorities having to make it any worse. But confused priorities and a lack of preparation and coordination ensured that this happened. The Indian Army plunged into rescue work, and did a creditworthy job, though it is debatable whether its efforts matched the high praise the media showered on it. It was the local people who helped themselves and their neighbours when outside assistance was slow in coming, and they were undoubtedly the heroes in this cataclysm, which was worsened by a history of neglect and an unresolved conflict.

In the midst of a calamity, a war of perceptions is never too far. This was evident in the two narratives coming out of Jammu and Kashmir as people grappled with devastating floods and their aftermath.

The first highlighted the contributions of the army, with editorials, TV reporters, and the print media eulogising it, and focusing on asking victims if they felt “grateful” to the army for saving them, and showing how “separatists” were engaging in mud-slinging. One channel went so far as to ask for Yasin Maik’s arrest as he was a “traitor”, without verifying the authenticity of a report filed by a little-known news agency. Few also had anything to say about the “saffron nationalists” who assaulted the vice chancellor of a university in Ujjain for asking landlords not to press Kashmiri students for their rent because their families had been affected by floods.

The second narrative was of reports from the ground in Kashmir, where reporters waded through waters day in and day out to focus on what was happening in one area after another, bringing out the role of the local people who lent a helping hand to others without waiting for help to arrive. Stories of distress and heroism emerged, of how people helped each other, cutting across all divides. From this, one could make out the prominent role the local people had played and are playing, now that rescue work is over and measures for relief and reconstruction are on, with committees constituted to handle the task. The calls for self-reliance and self-help that resound now show how empowered the people feel despite suffering one of the worst natural calamities in more than 100 years. The perception of manipulation also persists, ignoring that the flood affected not just Jammu and Kashmir, but

also 3,000 villages in Pakistan-Kashmir and Punjab.

Slow Official Response

Any natural calamity is a great leveller, sparing none. The flood waters inundated the army’s 15th Corps headquarters at Badamibagh in Srinagar under more than 6 metres of water. The civil administration’s offices and residences were also submerged. High and low, rich and poor, military men and civilians, and tourists and locals were affected alike in Jammu and in the Kashmir Valley. The full extent of destruction caused by landslides in Reasi and Udhampur, and floods in parts of Rajouri and Poonch took two weeks to be known. Once the water receded in Jammu, the situation improved, nevertheless leaving behind a trail of loss and destruction. However, the submergence of large parts of Srinagar, the summer capital and the key to coordinating rescue and relief activities in the Valley, meant that the civil administration and military could not respond in an adequate manner.

Rescue and relief, it emerged, had its own priorities. In Kashmir, the locals were initially largely left to fend for themselves, while 13,000 tourists and pilgrims were flown out, followed by officials, and others with the right contacts. A large number of migrant labourers remained stuck with the local population. There may have been reasons for this, no doubt – to ease the burden of rehabilitation and care, and the usual antipathy to working-class people. This meant that rescuing local people and poor migrants was delayed.

On the 10th day of the floods (14 September), the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the 15th Corps, Lt General Subarat Saha, made the claim that Srinagar had “well transitioned” from rescue to relief work. “Nobody is marooned any longer strictly speaking.” The director general of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) announced three days later, on 17 September, that in “technical terms rescue operations (have) concluded”. On the 10th day, the army claimed that it had rescued 1,84,000 people across

Gautam Navlakha (gnavlakha@gmail.com) is a member of People’s Union for Democratic Rights.

Kashmir, using 224 of their boats and 148 of the NDRF. But, the same day, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, while criticising “rumour mongers”, said that 80,000 people had been rescued, of whom 59,000 had been assisted by the army, 10,000 by the NDRF, and 21,000 by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the police, and local volunteers. So what happened to the remaining 1,00,000-odd people the army claimed it had rescued? This is no quibbling over numbers. These numbers were flaunted to enhance the image of the army as rescuers. Of course, they were a part of it, and the regiment mostly deployed, the Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry, did a commendable job. But by far the biggest and most heroic role was that of the local people. Given the scale of the devastation, 30,000 troops (9,000 in Jammu and 21,000 in Kashmir) were too few to rescue the 4,00,000 to 5,00,000 marooned in Srinagar alone, not to speak of Kulgam, Pulwama and Budgam.

Lack of Awareness and Coordination

No one, neither the civil nor the military administration, neither the state nor the centre, was remotely prepared for the flood despite a week of warning signs.

An indirect endorsement for the slow pace of rescue came with the decision to divert most of the troops to the Line of Control (LoC). Attorney General Mukul Rohatgi told a Supreme Court bench headed by the chief justice on 15 September that this was a time of “maximum infiltration. Forces have to be diverted there and these are sensitive parts” (*The Hindu*, 16 September 2014)¹ Even at a time of natural catastrophe, counter-insurgency concerns were never too far away.

This is not to belittle the efforts of anyone. But what stood out was that the army’s rescue work also turned into a public relations exercise, flying and rowing journalists around. By projecting themselves as “saviours” and the people as a “grateful populace”, widespread resentment was created. The jingoistic reporting from army helicopters and motor boats went horribly wrong

when it came to those who really mattered; the Kashmiris. And once the army claimed that it had done its work, the news disappeared.

What of the local people who saved more people than any government or military agency with rudimentary boats, sheer resolve, and common sense, and by reaching out to those who needed help? In place after place, the local people saved soldiers, civilians, tourists, the rich and the poor at a time when the civil administration and army headquarters were under water. The compassion and humanity displayed by them stood out when one realised that they had suffered grievously at the hands of the same military. No wonder that the demand for the withdrawal of the armed forces and the legal immunity enjoyed by them has huge support in Kashmir.

The lackadaisical response of the central government through its agencies also stood out. The first air drop revealed that substandard or expired food material, of 2009 vintage, was being distributed. Maybe it was done unwittingly, but that makes it even more despicable. Once rescue was replaced by relief, it again showed how callous central and state governments prolonged the agony of the people. For instance, water pumps dispatched by Andhra Pradesh to draw water out from inundated areas were either too small or sent without pipes. Engineers were sent, but with no orders or clear instructions on what they were supposed to be doing. Materials piled up at Udhampur railway station and Srinagar airport because of the paperwork required. While the media was praising the central government and the army, chaos continued on the ground, showing that both the central and state governments lacked coordination and purpose.

Fury of the Flood

The floods had a staggering impact on the state. No less than 2,600 villages were flooded and 390 were submerged. At least half of Srinagar was inundated with more than 6 metres of water. It is estimated that 15%, or 30,000, of 2,01,588 houses as per the 2011 Census, suffered

damages. Another report shows that no less than 2,34,516 structures suffered damage, and 20,000 were fully destroyed, including 70 army installations. Crops on 3,00,000 hectares were destroyed, worth an estimated Rs 3,674 crore. These are preliminary estimates and until Srinagar is back on its feet, the full extent of damage will remain partial. And there are other losses, such as the loss of rare items from the museum in Srinagar. Twenty-five of 28 police stations were severely damaged, with 60% of their documents such as first information reports (FIRs), case diaries, and registers lost. Srinagar’s lower court estimates that 80% of its records have been destroyed.

On the 21st day of the flood (27 September), Lal Chowk in Srinagar still remained under water, not as much as before, but enough to keep it shut. Since flushing water out from areas made slow progress, many of the houses that were flooded will not survive, and will have to be pulled down. It is this traumatic reality that many people face.

Jammu and Kashmir is not just any place. It is one over which three wars have been fought with Pakistan. For more than 25 years, India’s military has been waging a campaign with no end there. The state remains a “disturbed area” where civilians have suffered for decades without any hope of justice.

While the fury of the flood could not have been prevented, with 15 inches (nearly 45 cm) of precipitation in a week, it could have been tempered. Startlingly, the Central Water Commission, which forecasts floods and issues advisories to states, had no flood warning for Jammu and Kashmir.² Once the flood waters inundated Anantnag and Shopian on 2-3 September and reached Pampore in just 24 hours before arriving

Economic & Political WEEKLY

available at

Delhi Magazine Distributors Pvt Ltd

110, Bangla Sahib Marg
New Delhi 110 001
Ph: 41561062/63

in Srinagar on 5 September, there was ample time to act, even as the rain continued to pour. The lack of preparation – requisitioning boats and other emergency provisions, moving people from low-lying areas, and sand-bagging river banks – resulted in making the devastation greater. That the civil administration and local volunteers in Bandipora in north Kashmir used the time to make preparations and saved thousands of people from being affected shows that something could have been done in other places as well to reduce the effect of the flood.

The state government claims it pleaded with the central government for a Rs 1,500-crore plan in 2009 to dredge the Jhelum, but was allocated only Rs 100 crore. This raises several issues. Why was central clearance required to dredge a river? And why was it not cleared by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government? The share of central grants in the state's gross state domestic product (GSDP), which was 9% in 1980-81, rose to 47% by 2010-11 (*The Statesman*, 28 August 2014). All grants are tied to projects approved by the centre. In other words, local factors are less important than national ones, and this conditions and distorts priorities because everything is evaluated through a "security" prism. For instance, when emergency relief material was being collected and sent from different parts of the country, the suspicious police and agencies in Srinagar were busy searching them lest "separatists" take advantage of the situation. On 21 September, nearly three weeks after the floods hit the state, six tonnes of relief material were returned from Srinagar to Delhi because it was being sent by Kashmiri students in Delhi. And the government was obstructing the local people from undertaking relief, and routing everything through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international NGOs (INGOs) it trusted.

History of Neglect

Urban planning was resumed in Jammu and Kashmir in 1999. But the plan remained on paper. The clogging of natural water drainage systems and the

poor maintenance of the Jhelum and other rivers lakes did not improve. When the Indian Railways built tracks, it raised a bund without providing for drainage. As a result, it contributed to the flooding by blocking the path of water. Nobody cared, or no one was aware, that Kashmir's hydrography requires proper drainage. War, the unplanned growth of towns, and tourism and pilgrimage-related construction, such as in the forests around Pahalgam and on the bank of the Lidder River, have contributed to a dismal record on the environment.

However, the larger reason for frequent floods, according to Zubair A Dar, a US doctoral scholar on water policy and management in the Indus basin, is the unresolved Kashmir dispute, which has brought out deficiencies in the Indus Water Treaty (IWT), which prohibits Jammu and Kashmir from building dams with water storage upstream. He points out that despite Pakistan building large dams and storage facilities downstream, it has not been able to insulate itself from floods upstream. The ban on dams with storage facilities upstream, and enlarging the catchment area of the Wular Lake to prevent damage downstream, makes flood control schemes difficult. The severity of the floods in Pakistan-Kashmir and south

Punjab, which inundated Multan, strengthens this view. But the main reason for the logjam over the IWT is that Pakistan fears India will up the ante during a conflict through "strategic wartime usage" of dams and storage, which can cripple it because it depends on the Jhelum, Chenab, and Indus for nearly 77% of its water requirement.

In other words, the unresolved dispute and unsettled conditions compound problems many times over. It is not local politics, where severe restrictions remain on "separatists" even holding peaceful protest meetings, that does this. It is national chauvinism and the politicking over Jammu and Kashmir that is an overriding factor. Natural calamities are known to change politics. And floods are a great leveller. Do not be too surprised if the people's experience of helping themselves and working together, which has boosted their self-confidence, results in a resurgence of the demand for self-determination.

NOTES

- 1 *Asian Age* claimed on 13 September that the Jammatt-ud-Dawa's Hafeez Saeed was camping close to the LoC and trying to get Lashkar's naval unit to infiltrate into Kashmir.
- 2 None of CWC's level or inflow forecasts included Jammu and Kashmir and there were no hydrographs for the rivers of the state, "a shocking omission," according to Himanshu Thakkar of South Asia Network in "Dams, Rivers and People", *The Hindu*, 10 September 2014.

EPW E-books

Select EPW books are now available as e-books in Kindle and iBook (Apple) formats.

The titles are

1. **Village Society** (ED. SURINDER JODHKA)
(<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CS62AAW> ;
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/village-society/id640486715?mt=11>)
2. **Environment, Technology and Development** (ED. ROHAN D'SOUZA)
(<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CS624E4> ;
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/environment-technology-development/id641419331?mt=11>)
3. **Windows of Opportunity: Memoirs of an Economic Adviser** (BY K S KRISHNASWAMY)
(<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CS622GY> ;
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/windows-of-opportunity/id640490173?mt=11>)

Please visit the respective sites for prices of the e-books. More titles will be added gradually.