



Building Resilience Through Mainstreaming Social Inclusion In South Asia

Dr. Ishita Halder

Assistant Professor, Department of B.Ed.
Gobardanga Hindu College, West Bengal, India

Abstract: Since the initiation of 21st century, globally, the scale, intensity and frequency of climatic hazards have increased manifolds. South Asia, the most densely populated region of the world, is more vulnerable to natural hazards and disasters. Cities with higher concentration of people and assets are naturally vulnerable to disasters and all the major cities in South Asia are not only profoundly populated but also expanding rapidly and mostly, in an unplanned manner, thereby rendering them vulnerable to hazards and disasters. Such vulnerability together with rapid population growth, environmental degradation, socio-economic inequalities and resultant social exclusion further compound the challenges of a hazard or disaster like flood, earthquake, landslide, tropical cyclone etc. Uniquely, a resilient community responds positively and can cope with the damages and changes caused by a disaster. Only an all-inclusive urban resilience approach can ensure the benefit of all people as it encompasses the understanding of diverse needs and capabilities of all people and acknowledge the unique needs of the socially excluded and marginalized groups based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, caste, religion, sexual orientation, geographical location and disability status. The present paper is a qualitative study which seeks to explore the meaning and types of resilience, the reasons why South Asia is particularly concerned and the present status of social inclusion in building resilience and upholding disaster risk management (DRM) in South Asia.

Keywords: Resilience, hazard, disaster, social exclusion, social inclusion, disaster risk management (DRM).

Introduction

Since the initiation of 21st century, the scale, intensity and frequency of climatic hazards all around the world have increased manifolds by making the apprehensions of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) into reality (UNDRR, 2020). According to United Nations (2018) by 2050 almost 68 percent of world population will be living in the cities. Therefore, cities with higher concentration of people and assets, located along the coastline, floodplains, hilly areas, areas of volcanic activities and seismic rifts are naturally vulnerable to disasters. Risk aggravates with rapid and unplanned urbanization

on marginal lands and hazardous areas (Jha, Miner & Stanton-Geddes, 2013) and that is why Asia Pacific particularly South Asia is more vulnerable to natural hazards and disasters. In the past subsequent years, the chronological incidence of natural hazards and disasters e.g. earthquake and tsunami in Indian ocean (2004) and Japan (2011), large scale floods in Thailand (2011 and 2024), catastrophic tropical storms or cyclones in Philippines (2013, 2018), India (2029, 2020), Bangladesh (2021, 2023, 2024) and China (2024) have been tragic reminders of the immense loss of human lives and disastrous economic and social damage.

Hazards result into disasters when people, assets and habitats become vulnerable, exposed and destructed. The impacts of disasters go beyond immediate. Disasters disrupt economies, deepen inequalities, intensify poverty and obstruct long-term development gains (UNDRR, 2025). Due to infrastructural destruction, education system stalls, livelihoods disrupts and health services deteriorates. Hence, building resilience is not just an environmental imperative but also a pre-requisite of achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Instead of segmented approach, all-inclusive holistic approach is needed to address the challenges of hazards and disasters and build resilience (GFDRR, 2024). Only a flexible, inclusive and dynamic resilience approach can ensure the benefit of all people as it encompasses the understanding of diverse needs and capabilities of all people, acknowledge the unique needs of the socially excluded and marginalized groups and empower their unique abilities to build resilience. When communities are resilient and prepared for disasters, then number of displacement and magnitude of destruction is reduced.

Objectives

The objectives of the research work are as follows-

- ✓ To explore the concept of resilience.
- ✓ To enquire the reasons why South Asia is particularly concerned.
- ✓ To know about the traditional social exclusion found in South Asia and its implication in disaster risk management.
- ✓ To find the way forward through mainstreaming social inclusion.

Review of related literature

The human cost of disaster is tremendous as in the 21st century between 2000-2019, globally 4 million people were affected by disasters and nearly 1.2 billion people lost their lives (UNDRR, 2020). On an average, per year approximately 200 million people were affected by disasters worldwide and nearly 60,000 deaths per year (UNDRR, 2020). As more people are concentrated in environmentally susceptible areas, hence, more lives, livelihoods and assets are exposed to potential hazards (UNDRR, 2025). Disasters seldom come alone that is to say most of the devastating events are often multi-hazards

(UNDRR, 2025). The cascading and compounding impacts of disasters cannot be ignored. The cascading effects of disasters can be found on education as due to destruction and damage of educational infrastructure often schools are closed, service quality is compromised and school enrolment ratio reduces comprehensively (UNDRR, 2025). The health sector also suffers a lot due to destruction of infrastructure, machineries, loss of life-saving medicines and equipment. Therefore, the vulnerability and exposure to disasters increase with inequalities.

The disaster risks cannot be wholly eliminated but can be lessened considerably. Today investment in building resilience is inevitable, urgent and profitable also. Exclusion is costly in relation to building resilience against hazards and disasters. And including the excluded in the process of building resilience is a complex challenge (World Bank, 2013). Case studies across South Asia acknowledged the multiple challenges faced by the socially excluded groups (World Bank, 2021).

Methodology

The present study is qualitative in nature and has been conducted with the help of research journals, articles, data, periodicals and publications by World Bank, UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, International Dalit Solidarity Network etc.

Building Resilience: Concept and Types

Resilience is the ability of the people, community or society as a whole exposed to hazard or disaster of any kind to resist, enthrall, accommodate and recover from the adverse effects hurriedly and efficiently. Resilience goes beyond risk mitigation as it encompasses increased preparedness, speedy response and rapid recovery. Jha, Miner & Stanton-Geddes (2013), pointed out four components of urban resilience namely infrastructural, institutional, economic and social. Building, water, sanitation, health, transportation and communication are integral parts of an infrastructure. Hence, a resilient infrastructure should be flexible to adapt to the disturbances both known and unknown. Institutional resilience particularly deals with the local, regional and national governmental organizations which administer the community. The non-governmental organizations which work for social welfare and development are also significant elements of building institutional resilience. Economic diversity in terms of variety of occupation, ability to function after a disaster etc. builds economic resilience. It ensures solidarity funds for emergency needs, long-term aids to vulnerable population, financial assistance to the affected groups during crises etc.(UNDRR, 2025). Disaster risk insurance policies, catastrophe bonds etc. can provide contingency funds for locals and governments when there are limited resources. Social resilience depends on the demographic profile (age, sex, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status and other factors) and social capital (sense of community, sense of attachment, ability to adapt) of a community (Jha, Miner & Stanton-Geddes, 2013).

A resilient community responds positively and can cope with the changes caused by a disaster. To build a resilient community understanding of current risks prediction of future disasters are equally significant. Risk-based land use planning and hazard mapping by using Geographical Information System (GIS) combined with ecosystem management strategies like watershed management, green and blue infrastructure, environmental buffers etc. can promote resilience (Jha, Miner & Stanton-Geddes, 2013). The disaster risk can be reduced by reducing the exposure of the people and assets through online mapping system, real-time data, drone and satellite surveillance, managing the operational, social and fiscal impacts of the hazards and disasters (GFDRR, 2024).

Why South Asia Is Concerned?

South Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions to climate-induced extremes (World Bank, 2021). South Asia, the most densely populated region of the world, is also a place of geographical diversities and cultural milieu. All the major cities in South Asia are not only profoundly populated but also expanding rapidly in an unplanned manner thereby making them vulnerable to climatic hazards and disasters. In fact, future projections have predicted more intense and frequent climatic hazards in coming years. Such vulnerability together with rapid population growth, environmental degradation, socio-economic inequalities and resultant social exclusion further compound the challenges of a hazard like flood, earthquake, landslide, tropical cyclone etc. According to United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2020), between 2000 and 2019, Asia witnessed the highest number of disasters (3068) distantly followed by America (1756) and Africa (1192). Again, according to this report, globally the most affected countries by disaster events are China (577), U.S.A. (467), followed by India (321), Philippines (304), and Indonesia (278). From the above data, it is quite clear that among the top five disaster-affected countries in the last two decades (2000-2019), four countries are situated in South Asia. Flood (44%) is the utmost occurring disaster in the last two decades while affecting almost 1.6 billion people which is highest figure for any kind of disaster (UNDRR, 2020). Asia is the most affected continent by flooding with nearly 1.5 billion people affected (UNDRR, 2020). The entire South Asia, in fact, experience horrendous flooding events almost every year with China and India being the top two distressed countries having on an average 20 and 17 flooding events per year (UNDRR, 2020). Rapid and unplanned urbanization together with environmental degradation and climate change make the hazards far fiercer and disastrous in effect.

The Socially Excluded

The hazards and disasters have more severe impact on socially marginalized or excluded people like women, children, the elderly, the poor, persons with disabilities (PwD), indigenous people, ethnic and religious minorities etc. (World Bank, 2021). The socially marginalized or excluded people generally have limited resources and increased exposure to hazards and disasters augmented by the factor that they typically have zero representations in the decision-making body. In South Asia, social exclusion has always played a crucial part in both development and disaster outcomes. Global studies have already

recognized the relationship between poverty and climate-induced vulnerability as poor people are more exposed to hazards and are less likely to receive support (World Bank, 2021).

In South Asia, socio-cultural status bearing certain identities likely to get more opportunities to access resources, economic prospects and representations in decision-making bodies (World Bank, 2013). And it is also true that because of this social identity some get excluded as age, gender, race, ethnicity, caste, religion, sexual orientation, geographical location and disability status play significant roles in social inclusion or exclusion. The adverse impacts of disasters are multiplied combined with the intersections of different identities. Hence, the disaster risk management (DRM) must be socially inclusive. Proper resilience can develop only by taking into account the capabilities, needs and voices of socially marginalized groups.

The social and cultural norms and gender roles in different South Asian countries like household care and other responsibilities, limited asset and ownership of land, economic dependence etc. make women more vulnerable than others. They have limited mobility due to their role as a care provider for the children, the elders and also sick family members. Besides, due to lack of participation in the DRM planning process they have limited access to early warning system (World Bank, 2021) and that's why some subgroups of women e.g. single, widow, orphan or abandoned, lower caste, religious minority etc. are more susceptible than others. Owing to these reasons more women lost their lives in tsunami-hit Indonesia in 2004 and earthquake hit Nepal in 2015 (World Bank, 2021). The after-disaster experience of women is also horrific due to less access to relief and recovery and high incidence of gender-based violence and woman trafficking in the aftermath of past disasters (World Bank, 2021). Hence, DRM must devise strategies to reduce the gendered impacts of disasters and transform the passive sufferers (women) as active agents for resilience. India established such example in flood-hit Kerala (2018) where women-led self-help group were the primary responder in the relief and recovery process (World Bank, 2021).

In South Asia, the deeply rooted social exclusion linked to caste, religion and ethnicity, make people more susceptible than others upper in the social hierarchies. These excluded groups generally live in urban slums and marginal areas which are more susceptible to hazards and disasters and have limited access to clean water and sanitation facilities, health services etc. According to International Dalit Solidarity Network (2013), Caste-based discrimination is so widespread in South Asia that it affects nearly 260 million people on daily basis. Due to the entrenched social discrimination, the lower-caste people often have unequal access to the emergency aids like drinking water, dry foods, shelter and clothes after a disaster. Multi-faceted exclusion arises when caste-based discrimination crosses path with different intersections of identities like age, gender, disability status etc. Lower caste people suffered most during Gujarat earth quake (India, 2001), Kosi flood (Nepal, 2008) as their plight worsened due to lack of reporting of dalit asset and life loss, unequal distribution of relief and rehabilitation (IDSN, 2013) and dearth of participation in DRM.

Almost 15 percent of world population live with some kind of disability and more importantly, the prevalence of disability is expected to increase due to rising number of wars, hazards and disasters, diseases, violence and conflicts (GFDRR, 2018). Asia and Pacific is the home to almost 650 million persons with disabilities (PwD) and the number is expected to rise rapidly due to a number of factors comprising increase in the count of natural and human-induced disasters (UNESCAP, 2015). This marginalized group of persons with disabilities (PwD) include physical, mental, sensory or intellectual impairment and associated social barriers. etc. who need proper access to disaster related information through early warning system as they need adequate time to prepare. Their participation is most anticipated and most welcome in all the DRM policy documents but in practice, the needs and requirements of PwD are not properly addressed. Participation of PwD in DRM pose unique challenges as their needs vary with unique individual abilities and characteristics (World Bank, 2021). As a result, the fatality level is very high for PwD in any type of hazard or disaster. The most embracing example is the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan where PwD fatality rate was four times higher than general population (UNESCAP, 2015). The intersections between disability and other variables of social exclusion (age, gender, caste, religion etc.) may render some sub-groups more vulnerable than other PwD. Disability is a risk factor for poverty and vice versa (World Bank, 2021). Substantial challenges may arise when both these criteria meet like physical and communication barrier, barriers to essential services etc.

Age related challenges like limited mobility, decreasing physical strength, health problems e.g. blood pressure, dementia and other health issues are exacerbated combined with other factors like poverty, gender discrimination, socio-economic status, social isolation etc. In the Japan earthquake and tsunami (2011), the elderly people (above 65 years) accounted for about 56 percent of the death toll (UNDRR, 2016).

In South Asia, the role of elderly population especially that of the elderly women in DRM is very much limited which may be ascribed to lack of financial resources, absent or reduced earnings, stigma related to ailments like dementia, increased social isolation and other forms of discrimination (HelpAge International, 2013). It must be remembered that the critical knowledge and experience of the elderly people gained from the past disasters can help in early warning system as well as disaster preparedness and mitigation.

Poverty and climate vulnerability have an intimate relationship as the poor are habitually compelled to live in those marginalized and fringe areas of a city which are more susceptible to hazards and have fewer financial resources to prepare for and recover from the aftermath of disasters. Their socio-economic status often inhibits their access to post-disaster assistance (World Bank, 2021). The intersection of poverty with other marginalized or socially excluded identities, very often worsen the plight of the disaster-affected people. For example, the devastating flood in India in 2018 wreak havoc in the remote hilly areas of Kerala inhabited by the tribal population (World Bank, 2021).

From the study it is clear that when different intersections of socially excluded or marginalized groups meet, the impact of social exclusion exacerbates manifolds specially in disaster context. The plight of *mallah* or fishing community in Pakistan, indigenous communities of Nepal and Sri Lanka are a few examples of such incidence.

Mainstreaming Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is the foundation for shared prosperity. Social inclusion is imperative in disaster risk management (DRM) in South Asia for improved resilience outcomes for all (World Bank, 2021). To mainstream social inclusion in DRM, proper understanding of the factors of social exclusion, their intersections, knowledge about different stages of DRM cycle etc. are necessary pre-requisite.

Inclusion of representatives from all segments of the society is imperative to recognize the needs and capabilities of all stakeholders specially the excluded. Only inclusive policy framework cannot ensure inclusive planning and implementations. Capacity building is imperative for all the stakeholders at local, regional and national levels. Only detailed analysis and research can find the inclusive gaps in different stages of a DRM cycle and can form more structured and all-inclusive DRM.

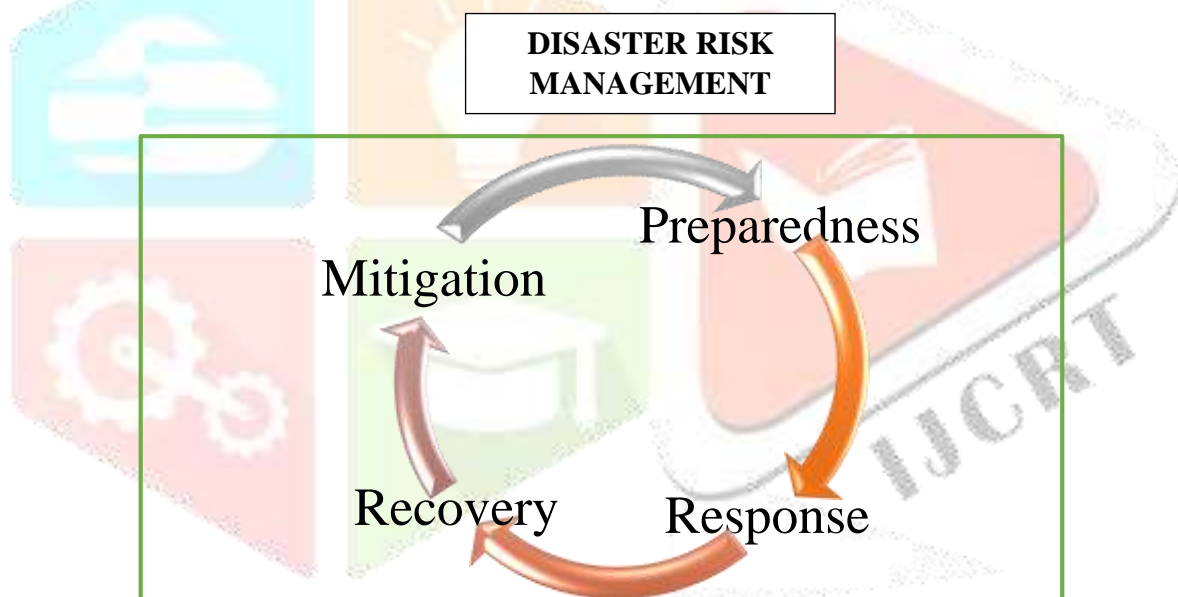


Fig. 1: Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Cycle

The voices of the marginalized and excluded groups can be heard through different organizations and self-help groups like women's self-help groups, old age organizations etc. Such groups can reflect the needs of the marginalized as well as ensure the participation of the excluded in the planning and decision-making process thereby crafting the pathway of inclusive and sustainable resilience.

Raising awareness about inclusive resilience is essential. The World Bank South Asia created animation video to raise awareness through digital platforms and social media. Now-a-days, the hazard information is available well in advance. But the countries must also try to collect data about exposure and disaster vulnerability of different regions. Accurate data collection and analysis can enable the government to predict maximum probable losses.

At the third UN conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), the **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-30)** was recognized. It is a voluntary, non-binding agreement aiming at building all-inclusive resilience and effective response in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction (UNDRR, 2020). Yet only policies are not enough, policies need to be transformed into reality, into actions. To develop all-inclusive resilience, some principles must be followed –

- DRM guidelines and policy frameworks should mainstream social inclusion.
- Acknowledgement and discussion about the differential needs and experiences of the socially marginalized groups.
- Engagement of local community (including the socially excluded or marginalized) at every step in the DRM and prioritization on all-inclusive decision-making process.
- Raising awareness about inclusive resilience.

To ensure full participation of PwD in DRM, at first, the barriers such as accessibility, information and communication related barriers must be eliminated. The location and accessibility of relief centre and different services can pose accessibility related barriers. Such barriers can be eliminated by planning an accessible location for all, accessible transportation and services (ramp, water supply etc.) to the emergency shelters. The information related barrier can be conquered through early warning system should not be only in written messages, it should be accessible in audio and video format with sign language.

Due to the stereotyped gender roles, the same disaster often affects men and women differently. The gender specific impacts of disasters often include higher mortality rate of girls and women, early and forced marriages, increased maternal mortality rate, deterioration in sexual and reproductive health, loss of livelihoods and gender-based violence (GFDRR, 2017). The participation of the affected women in identifying and prioritizing recovery needs are key to an effective recovery. Counselling is also needed to develop positive coping strategies. A gender-responsive recovery should be included in the DRM. Greying of population is a global phenomenon. Japan is leading the way in building social resilience through Ibasho Café Project (GFDRR, 2015) where older people share their experiences of disasters and possible ways to cope with the aftermath.

Recent Activities in South Asia

According to World Bank (2021) in South Asia, Bangladesh is leading the way through its 2015 Dhaka Declaration on Disability. Nepal has established National Reconstruction Authority to provide special assistance to the vulnerable groups during post-disaster reconstruction. Pakistan and India have established community based DRM management like early warning system for visually and hearing-impaired people. In 2014, India became the first country to implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) legally and as a result, the corporate sector became active in post-disaster relief and management. Japan's proactive investments in seismic design and resilient construction helped the country to face the frequent challenges related to earthquakes and tsunami. The 'Billion Tree Tsunami Afforestation Project'

of Pakistan is a mention-worthy project which aims to plant one billion trees in the country to reduce the negative impacts of deforestation, soil erosion and flood hazards. To address the challenges of hydro-meteorological and climatic challenges and to coordinate efforts for shared solutions **South Asia Hydromet Forum (SAHF)** was established in 2018.

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that disasters are a defining feature of the 21st century (UNDRR, 2025). Floods, droughts, forest fires, cyclones, heatwaves and cold waves have become more threatening and persistent over the years. According to UNDRR (2025), with deteriorating climate crisis, the loss of communities and economies will amplify with each passing year. Building resilience not only saves lives but also economies and ensures a prosperous future for all. There are ample examples of resilience where floodplain communities with proper access to resources, data-base and scientific tools, have built their own disaster risk reduction thereby reducing fatalities from floods (UNDRR, 2025). Investment patterns (like investment in green and resilient infrastructure, renewable energy etc.) and forward-looking social policies (to aid households cope better and recover quicker) must evolve to become more effective. These investments can bolster resilience on one hand and ensure regional prosperity on the other thereby moving forward from costly emergency relief to proactive risk reduction (UNDRR, 2025).

According to UNDRR (2025), the effort towards building resilience has yielded positive results as the disaster-related death toll has reduced in the decade of 2014-2023 from the previous decade (2005-2014). Though the efforts are not evenly distributed as regions with limited resources, rapid and unplanned urbanization are suffering prominently but, at least, the human cost of disasters has been arrested in some regions. Therefore, the future challenge lies with breaking the vicious cycle of disaster-recovery-debt and building resilience all over the world and ensuring the resilience to be an inclusive one.

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