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The Politics of Natural Disasters in Protracted Conflict: The 2014 Flood in Kashmir

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Abstract

This paper explores the politics of the 2014 floods in the contentious and conflict-prone Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The September 2014 floods were the most serious natural disaster in the state in the past 60 years, and affected some two million people in the Kashmir valley. Drawing on qualitative interview evidence from 50 flood victims in south, central and north Kashmir, the paper examines the extent to which the disaster transformed existing political narratives. In doing so, it examines the role of the state and central governments, the army, local volunteers, and the media. The paper engages with the politics of disaster literature, exploring how disasters can serve as a lens rather than as a catalyst, and stressing the relevance of understanding the social construction of disaster narratives.

1. Introduction

Natural disasters are viewed as politically potent and transformative ‘tipping points’ – that is, as moments in which deeply etched political narratives and relationships are transcended and transformed. This paper opens up and engages with this and other related questions on the politics of natural disasters by drawing on qualitative evidence collected from affected people in the immediate aftermath of a large natural disaster in late 2014 in the politically contentious Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The 2014 floods in Jammu and Kashmir were by far the most serious natural disaster in living memory in the state, and directly affected two million people. Heavy monsoon rains for five consecutive days led to landslides and rising water levels which completely inundated thousands of villages and large parts of the state capital Srinagar under 15 or more feet of water. Hundreds of thousands were displaced by the floods for up to a month, often returning to find their houses destroyed and assets lost.

The widespread destruction wrought by the floods inevitably intersected with the intense political contentions and divisions on the ground. Jammu and Kashmir is a divided and disputed territory, the subject of rival international claims and wars fought between India and Pakistan since independence in 1947. In the Kashmir valley, which is over 95 percent Muslim and falls in the Indian part of the state, there is widespread and open hostility to Indian rule and deep resentment towards its security forces. This stems, on the one hand, from the larger unresolved and long-festering political problem which is a legacy of the disputed incorporation of the state into India in 1947: Kashmiris are very conscious of their politically ambiguous status, and aspire for a final political resolution to the dispute. But, on

the other hand, anger at the Indian state also has a sharper, more recent edge stemming from the unhealed scars of the brutal militancy and counter-insurgency period of the early 1990s, in which an unknown number of people – assumed to be in the tens of thousands – were killed or tortured or disappeared (Schofield 1996, Bose 2003, Ganguly 2003).

Armed militancy has subsided significantly since it peaked in 2002, and the everyday security situation for civilians was by the time of the floods in 2014 much improved. Yet the relationship between the state and the people remained tense and prone to breakdown. Kashmiris manifestly resent Indian rule, view the security forces as an alien army of occupation, and are scornful of local electoral politics as an instrument of this. Yet the impossibility of changing this painful reality means that people's anger and anguish feed their bitterness and impotent rage. Even isolated incidents of violence involving the security forces spark valley-wide protests lasting several days.

In 2009, there was a wave of protests over the rape and murder of two young women in the southern district of Shopian. In 2010, there was an even longer and more protracted wave of unrest and 'stone pelting' in which over one hundred people were killed. In 2013, the valley erupted in protests for days over the execution of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri convicted for the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament (Kak 2011, Duschinski and Hoffman 2011, Fazili 2014). In 2016, 50 people including two policemen were killed in the widespread unrest which followed the killing of militant leader Burhan Wani by security forces.

As such, Kashmir has been locked in a state of wounded abnormality for so long that the extraordinary has become routinized, part of the ordinary. People factor the likelihood of

sudden disruptions into their coping strategies of normal life. Everyday forms of resistance against the status quo co-exist alongside the everyday necessity to collaborate with it. It is this context which forms the point of departure for understanding the politics of the 2014 floods: the sudden crisis triggered by a natural disaster was layered over what was a protracted, pre-existing political crisis.

The agenda and contribution of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, it brings to light narratives of the disaster as it was felt from the ground. As Ed Simpson notes in relation to the Bhuj earthquake, disaster narratives are written largely from “above” and “the outside” (Simpson 2013). This paper seeks instead to ask how victims experienced and understood the 2014 floods, and how they are trying to emerge from it. It provides insights into the circumstances and consequences of the flooding, destruction, rescue and relief, and casts light on the role of different actors such as the state government, the Indian media, the Indian army and local volunteers.

In doing so, this part of the paper draws upon the idea of disaster as a lens. That is, disasters provide a revealing moment of transparent, raw clarity into social realities which are otherwise obscured. Many elements of the survivor narratives take the form of insights into normal life which people gain under conditions of the disaster. By examining survivor narratives, it becomes possible not only to access those insights, but in turn also to learn something of the nature of the lens itself. That is, the retelling of disaster experiences is significant not only for bringing these often-obscured narratives to light, but also for what it says of the narrators themselves and for the way the social construction of the disaster occurs and is committed to historical memory.

Secondly, the paper explores the larger political implications of the floods and connects this to the comparative debates on the politics of natural disasters. In particular, it engages with the idea of disaster as a political rupture – as a ‘tipping point’, or watershed moment of far-reaching consequence. We examine the extent to which events in Kashmir and survivor narratives bear this out. More specifically, the paper draws on survivor narratives to examine the issue of whether the disaster was politically transformative, and how the dynamics of political tipping points and transformations unfold. However, in doing so, we are also alert to the possibility that this idea operates at a variety of different levels, including within the expectations and instrumental actions of the various actors on the ground. We draw on the Kashmir case in order to examine whether and how the notion of political transformation actually takes shape in the dynamics of disaster politics.

2. Literature Review

There has been a growing body of research in recent years on the politics of natural disasters, within which there are six important strands of literature of significance from which to draw and engage.

Firstly, and as an entry point to the literature as a whole, there is the compulsion to socialise and politicise natural disasters, which are otherwise viewed in entirely scientific and technical terms. This literature, which is broadly sympathetic to and derivative of critical political ecology (Forsyth 2004), has sought to emphasise the human element over the physical. This paper is fundamentally located within this milieu – that is, it is informed in its broader assumptions, axioms and sensibility by the imperative to stress the ‘disaster’ aspects over the

'natural', and to view the event in terms of the social and political nature of its causation and consequences (Wisner et al. 2004, Albala-Bertrand 1993, Olson 2000, Pelling and Dill 2006, Guggenheim 2014).

Secondly, disasters serve as a moment of stark political revelation. As Guggenheim (2014: 6-7) explains, disasters are 'empirical sites to understand politics...they decompose what is usually difficult to analyse'. The abrupt suspension of normal life lifts the veil and provides profound, raw, undisguised – and frequently very shocking – insights into the inner structures of that world. It is this idea that serves as the premise from which this paper seeks to gain access to the landscape of disaster politics. The relationship between state and society, tested under duress, becomes transparent in the public domain. As Cuny (1983: 54) writes, 'disasters often highlight the social struggles in a society and underscore the inherent inequities within a political system'. Similarly, Pelling and Dill (2006: 4) explain how: 'The way in which the state and other sectors act in response and recovery is largely predicated on the kind of political relationships that existed between sectors before the crisis.' This paper draws on the idea of disaster as a lens, and it is in this context that the evidence basis of this paper, in the form of survivor narratives, gains particular relevance.

Thirdly, and more fundamentally in forming the paper's core research agenda, disasters are identified as transformative political moments or 'tipping points' (Pelling and Dell 2010). As Chhotray (2014) writes, 'Disasters are key political moments in the life of a society'. Disaster politics have a particularly sharp effect on the relationship between state and society, and raise fundamental questions about citizenship and state- society relations. As is often cited in the case of post-tsunami Aceh (Gaillard et al. 2008), they offer new possibilities for actors to

transcend the past, envision ground-realities anew, and forge transformative relationships (Kreutz 2012). As Walch (2014) describes, collaborative relief efforts between state and anti-state insurgent groups occur where there are low levels of hostility and a positive social contract of public service provision by the insurgent group.

But this optimistic scenario of conflict transformation through a political unlocking is far from common. Disasters serve more frequently to arouse public anger and outrage at the inadequacy of government relief efforts, coalescing political mobilisations about the incompetence or the politicised distribution of relief. As Olson (2000: 159) points out, natural disasters are agenda control and accountability crises for public officials. In other words, they can well bring about significant political transformations, but as Nel and Righarts (2008) and Brancati (2007) find, this happens not through conflict resolution but through its escalation and sharpening.

The East Pakistan cyclone of November 1970, in which several hundred thousand people are thought to have been killed, is often taken as an illustrative case in point. Public anger at the inaction and apathy of the West Pakistan-dominated government towards the disaster played a critical role in deepening the divisions between two wings of the country. It led, in just over a year, to the break-up of Pakistan (Sisson and Rose 1991) and the formation of Bangladesh out of its Eastern wing.

These far-reaching possibilities have, as a result, led insecure and authoritarian states to view natural disasters and the spontaneous forms of non-state collective action which they generate as politically subversive. As Pelling and Dill (2006) describe, non-state relief

organisations were suppressed and demobilised after the earthquakes in Guatemala (1976), Chile (1985), and Turkey (1999).

At the heart of these larger political dynamics which follow natural disasters are the ways in which the provision of relief and the identification of blame and failure are established and translated through moral-cognitive frameworks. Those who have the capacity and willingness visibly to provide relief can gain in legitimacy, gratitude and public standing. The control of desperately needed resources also shifts power, and allows patrons to cultivate political loyalty, enhance clientelist networks, and gain electoral mileage. At the same time, it also does the converse, and delegitimizes those who are seen to be inactive, absent or profiting from the misery of others. The political stakes in any disaster are thus high, and can have lasting consequences.

This means that conditions of emergency and abject human need are a moment of reinvention, in which political success and failure can be forged. These politically pregnant possibilities are widely understood and closely observed among political actors in disaster-struck areas, so that alongside the competition to command and allocate resources is another, more frantic competition to shape public perceptions (Tierney and Bevc 2007).

This leads to the fourth point of engagement between disasters and politics: the social construction of disasters. Disaster, suffering, rescue, relief and rehabilitation exist not just in terms of fixed scientific and statistical realities of ecological change, body counts and reconstruction costs, but in terms of processes of meaning-making through which people – victims, interlocutors, administrators, relief workers, and even long distance voyeurs – grasp

and come to terms with an event. In divided and contentious political environments such as Kashmir, this involves polarised meanings and claims about what really happened, and about who the heroes and villains of the disasters were.

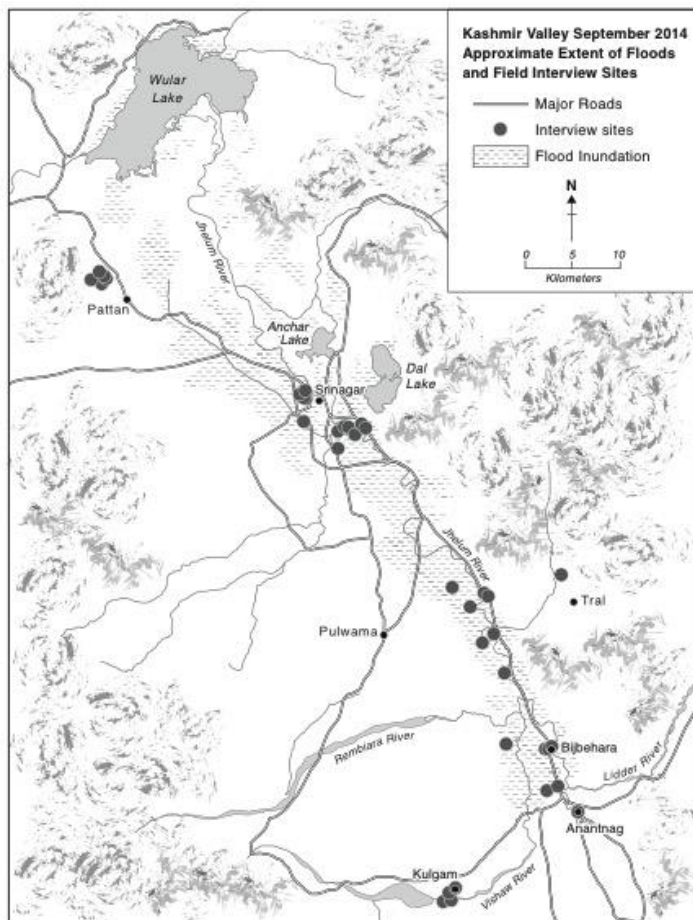
Given the role of failed relief in destabilising state-society relationships, there is an important fifth arena of research on the politics of disasters which examines the role of the donor, and the significance of the donor-recipient relationship. Korf (2007), Korf et al. (2010) and Hollenbach and Ruwanpura (2011) highlight the deep ambivalence and problematic nature of relief and reconstruction aid. In cases where the gift of aid and differences in power or status preclude any possibility of reciprocity, it creates a social debt. Relief and reconstruction aid, as unrequited gifts, carry within them the increased standing of the giver, and the deeper obligation of the receiver. It means that the recipient acquiesces and accepts his/her inferior position in the social hierarchy, and becomes complicit in its reproduction. Rather than transcending the past, disasters can perpetuate, reinforce and reproduce it into the future.

This sixth dimension of the politics of disasters thus relates to this issue of relief and reconstruction as a nationalist political project. Hasbullah and Korf (2009) describe how the reconstruction of Sri Lanka's east coast after the tsunami involved an intensification of the project of ethnic 'purification'. Simpson and Corbridge (2006) describe how the memorialization and reconstruction after the Bhuj earthquake in the Indian state of Gujarat was deeply infused by Hindu nationalism. But nationalism operates not just as a political project from above: it equally affects the personal ethics and moral framework which guide bottom-up volunteerism, as Sabhlok's (2010) ethnography of aid workers, also in the context of Bhuj, explores.

3. Fieldwork and Evidence

The empirical basis of the paper rests primarily on 50 in-depth interviews conducted with households of flood victims from some of the main flood-affected districts in the state: Kulgam, Pulwama, Anantnag in south Kashmir, Srinagar in the centre, and Baramulla in the north. This was complemented with, and triangulated against, a review of documentary evidence from local newspaper coverage of the floods, primarily in the English and, to a limited extent, in the Urdu press over the period 2–28 September 2014.

FIGURE 1: KASHMIR VALLEY SEPTEMBER 2014. APPROXIMATE EXTENT OF FLOODS AND FIELD INTERVIEW SITES



Interviews were conducted in October and November 2014, just as flood waters ebbed and displaced people were returning from relief camps to their homes. By design, all 50 households interviewed were Kashmiri Muslims, who constitute an overwhelming demographic majority of between 95 to 98 percent across the valley. We sought out research sites that stretched across the geographical breadth of the parts of the Kashmir valley which had been particularly badly affected by the floods. Households were selected in a non-random manner through snowballing contact methods to arrive at a purposive sample which covered a broad cross-section of society in the valley. The intent in doing so was to capture some of the commonalities and differences in narratives across geographical and class divides.

The interviewees included relatively wealthy business elites and senior government officials in affluent parts of Srinagar, lower middle-class shopkeepers, public sector employees such as teachers, and the rural poor, including marginal farmers, half-widows (wives of the disappeared), small shopkeepers, and retirees living on basic pensions. Overall, there were four interviews from Kulgam, eight from Anantnag, eight from Pulwama, 18 from Srinagar, and 12 from Baramulla.

Interviews were mostly in Kashmiri, and were conducted and translated by the authors. The interviews consisted of a broad and open-ended series of questions which asked people to describe the circumstances of the disaster, the nature of their escape from the floods, the identity of those who came to their assistance, the extent of relief, the nature of the losses suffered, and their reflections on the role of various actors, from the media to the army. In general, people were very willing to respond and spoke at length, often passionately. The

stories they narrated were often extraordinary, poignant and at times, disturbing. But they were not unusual given the enormity of the tragedy and the hundreds of thousands of people who were affected.

This empirical exercise among flood survivors is significant for its originality and depth as well as for its timing. It provides fresh insights into the disaster from the point of view of its survivors at a time when they were still absorbing and coming to terms with the magnitude of the tragedy and its consequences. It brings their experiences, reflections and frustrations to light, in their own words and through the lens of their own subjectivities. At the same time, these same factors also pose research limitations which should be acknowledged. Due to the complicated circumstances in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, there were practical difficulties in conducting the fieldwork, in selecting and crafting an optimal sample, and in interpreting the findings.

Many residences in the surveyed areas were still unoccupied or were badly damaged and left abandoned, so the sample was restricted to those households who had returned, were physically present, and were willing to be interviewed at the time of the visit. In addition, a familiar set of issues arose regarding the use of the household as the unit of analysis and the identity of the actual respondent within the household. The 50 respondents comprised 13 women and 37 men. This gender disproportionality was not a conscious decision and was difficult to predict, control or mitigate. This was not just because it was subject to the availability of household members at the time of the interview, but also because the composition of many households had recently changed due to the death, displacement and temporary relocation of family members during the floods.

Finally, the type of fieldwork described here – with qualitative interviews conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire, and the possibility of free-flowing responses – had its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it allowed for nuance, depth and off-script conversations. Respondents could prioritise and emphasise issues of their own concern rather than passively providing answers to questions conceived and prioritised by an interviewer. This was a critical element of the fieldwork, and a necessary one given the nature of the research question at hand. But it also meant that the responses were in themselves idiosyncratic and individualized such that they were often not easily amenable to drawing out simple inferences from side-by-side comparison. The work of analyzing the interviews thus involved the clustering and reconstruction of important narratives, rather than the tabulation of standardized data.

There was a convergence of a number of important narratives in the interviews, which are expanded on below in five broad clusters. These are: (i) the suddenness of the disaster, the lack of warning, and the unpreparedness for its extent; (ii) the paralysis and absence of the state; (iii) the role of local youth, voluntary organisations and local social networks; (iv) unfairness in rescue, relief provision and prioritization; and (v) anger at national media coverage of the floods. The rest of the paper expands on these five clusters, situates them within their context, and concludes with a discussion which engages with the political repercussions of the floods and the broader study of the politics of disasters.

4. Context

It looked like doomsday. God should never show that day again. In the 51 years of my life I have never seen water being so angry it just wanted to take away what ever came on its way. (Interview 43, Kulgam, 11 July 2014)

From 2-6 September 2014, heavy monsoon rains occurred across the Kashmir valley, triggering landslides and flooding across the state. In particular, an arc of heavy rain hit the southern part of the valley and the adjoining hill districts of Poonch, Rajouri, Reasi and Ramban amounting to as much as 10 times the normal rainfall in that period. By 3 September, the water level at the Sangam bridge near Bijbehara had crossed the danger mark as the main southern tributaries of the Jhelum – the Rembiara, Vishaw, Brengi, Kuthar and Sandran – had already risen high enough to flood parts of the valley.

Heavy rains continued until 6 September and flood water peaked on 8 September, receding and draining slowly over the next three weeks. In the valley, a total 557 km² of land was inundated, directly affecting villages and towns occupied by two million people, or almost 40 percent of the total population of the valley. In total, 268 people died as a result of the floods. In the affected parts of the Kashmir valley, which is the focus of this study, there were relatively fewer deaths compared to Poonch, Rajauri and Reasi in Jammu district, which suffered serious landslides and flash flooding. But as the economic and administrative hub of the state, with the bulk of its population, the impact was far greater in the valley in terms of

the number of people displaced, houses damaged, crops destroyed, and productive enterprises lost.

In the rural areas of south Kashmir, entire villages and thousands of acres of farmlands were submerged. In some villages, virtually every house and structure had crumbled in the torrent, leaving very little behind. The rural economy suffered heavily with the saffron and apple crops bearing estimated losses of Rs 700 Cr and Rs 1000 Cr, respectively (USD 100 million and USD 150 million), (Yasir 2014b, Assocham 2014). In the capital Srinagar alone, some 73,000 houses were damaged or destroyed, as many parts of the city remained under 14 feet of water for days. People in the flooded areas were either forced to flee their homes in the face of a rising current, or else were stranded awaiting rescue, without food, water or communication for days.

Most people remained displaced or in distressed conditions for the next three weeks, and it was only on 1 October that water levels receded to the point where occupants were able to return and inspect the damage. At the time of the interviews, which took place in October-November, flood waters had receded entirely, but large numbers of flood victims remained in acute distress, struggling to confront the enormity of the financial and human loss they had suffered. As a young man from Srinagar described, 'The mental trauma, the stress that we have suffered cannot be conveyed' (Interview 11, Srinagar, 15 October 2014).

The geography and ecology of the Kashmir valley have rendered it prone to periodic flooding by the River Jhelum and its tributaries historically (Koul 1978; Singh and Kumar 2013). In recent years, Kashmir experienced floods in 1992, 1996 and 2006. Historical sources on

Kashmir from the earliest kingdoms to the Mughal and Afghan periods include numerous accounts of flooding and its effects on the valley (Kaw 1996). Sir Walter Roper Lawrence's classic travelogue from 1895, *The Valley of Kashmir*, also mentions the many disastrous floods he encountered in vernacular histories, including the terrible inundation of 879 A.D. He himself experienced the floods of 1893 and wrote of its terrible cost: 'In 1893 the floods cost the State Rs 64,802 in land revenue alone, 25,426 acres under crops were submerged, 2,225 houses were wrecked and 329 cattle killed (Lawrence 1895: 207).

This natural predisposition of the Kashmir valley to periodic floods notwithstanding, disasters are more than just natural phenomena and are profoundly shaped by the human environment, both in terms of causation and impact. As Wisner et al. (2004: 4-5) note, disasters are also the product of social, political and economic environments:

These involve the manner in which assets income and access to other resources such as knowledge and information are distributed between different social groups, and various forms of discrimination that occur in the allocation of welfare and social protection (including relief and resources for recovery).

As with many other heavily populated, flood-prone Himalayan areas, the ecological and geographical vulnerability of the valley to floods has been aggravated by recent anthropogenic causes which have increased its intensity and impact. Aside from global-level concerns about climate change, local factors have to do with changes in land-use patterns such as increased construction on the floodplain, deforestation in upper catchment areas, the shrinkage of wetlands in lower areas, and poor flood management. These changing land-use patterns are closely interwoven with economic, social and political trajectories, so that

any account of the Kashmir floods must necessarily take these factors into account not just in its consequences, but also in its causation.

5. Narratives of Disaster Survivors

My son had not even put on his slippers.

(Interview 35, Kulgam, 20 October 2014)

Despite the long history of flooding, and the particular vulnerability of the valley, the 2014 floods were remarkable for their magnitude and breadth of damage. In a short space of time, a large part of the population suddenly lost their homes, all their personal possessions, livestock, crops, tools, economic assets and important documents. People recounted ‘a catastrophe never seen before’ (Interview 35, Kulgam, 20 October 2014). A young man in Srinagar said, ‘I literally don’t have words to describe that disaster of nature’ (Interview 6, Srinagar, 7 October 2014). It was ‘the worst thing that has ever happened to us...we lost everything’ (Interview 36, Srinagar, 5 November 2014). Others talked of how, once they had reached safety, they watched from a distance in distress as their houses were gradually inundated and then collapsed.

What also stands out about the Kashmir floods of 2014 is the lack of an early warning system, the extent of unpreparedness for the disaster, and the surprise with which people were consequently forced to confront it. Most people remained in their homes until the very last minute as waters rose, by which time they were either trapped inside, or else were forced to escape because their homes were collapsing. The lack of advance warning or timely

evacuation has had a clear impact on the extent of human suffering and economic loss which resulted.

Surprise, Loss and Evacuation

Unlike the flash floods and landslides of the adjoining mountainous parts of Rajouri or Poonch, which took place without much warning on the first two days, the floods in the valley spread relatively slowly from south to north. The high flood waters of the Jhelum and its tributaries took five days to make the 120-kilometre journey from south to north: Pulwama was submerged on Wednesday 3 September, Anantnag on 5 September, Srinagar on 6 September, and Baramulla on 9 September. Yet it took the authorities and people of each newly flooded area by surprise.

On 3 September, a farmer from Kulgam recounted, 'When we woke up there was water all around...we were not expecting such large scale damage' (Interview 43, Kulgam, 7 November 2014). Two days later, when Anantnag, some 20 kilometres away, was flooded, a businessman described how it 'caught people unaware' (Interview 41, Anantnag, 21 November 2014). Four days after this, and just 80 kilometres away when the floods reached Pattan, a family of carpet weavers similarly recounted their shock at how 'water burst into the house all of a sudden at 5am' (Interview 24, Pattan, 17 October 2014).

In the rural areas of Kulgam, Anantnag and Pulwama districts, which were affected in the first two days, large areas of agricultural lands were flooded, and people fled homes and villages on foot because their houses were destroyed by the height and force of the current. In Srinagar, where better-built two- or three-storey concrete houses were able to withstand the

floods, most people found themselves trapped on the second floor or roof of their houses. Virtually all of the households interviewed in the affected parts of Srinagar spent between three days to two weeks trapped in their houses with little water or food.

As a result of the lack of warning or early evacuation, people responded only at the very last minute, under emergency conditions, often in the middle of the night. In Srinagar, there was a very sudden escalation of water levels in the early hours of 7 September, trapping a large portion of the one million residents of the city inside their houses. A family from Indra Nagar described how a 12-foot high tide of water first entered their house at 4am, after which 'in seven minutes the ground floor was inundated' (Interview 1, Srinagar, 7 October 2014).

Another household in Bemina described: 'Our ground floor got inundated in just half an hour' (Interview 10, Srinagar, 15 October 2014).

This surprise element of the floods, which was a recurrent narrative in the interviews, had three serious consequences. Firstly, the lack of preparedness resulted in enormous, and to some extent preventable, financial loss. Although much of the damage, particularly to agricultural crops and houses, could not have been prevented even with early warning, the loss of movable equipment, tools, raw materials and finished goods suffered by businessmen, shopkeepers and artisans as well as a great deal of personal property and household possessions could well have been better managed.

The floods also occurred during the traditional wedding season in Kashmir (Yousuf 2014a), as a result of which there was one widely reported tragedy where an entire wedding bus party of 50 people were washed away and killed in the hill district of Rajouri (Shah 2014). Beyond

this, it also meant that many families lost large amounts of expensive ceremonial material, often amounting to several hundred thousand rupees, such as clothes and jewellery which had been stored in their homes. A barber from Kulgam described: 'My daughter was getting married next month all the preparation had been completed. All those objects were washed away in front of my eyes' (Interview 43, Kulgam, 7 November 2014).

Secondly, it meant that families with elderly or infirm members with medical conditions had great difficulty in escaping the floods, in getting evacuated, or in accessing regular medication. A shopkeeper from Kursoo Rajbagh in Srinagar described: 'My father is blind, we had great difficulty in evacuating him' (Interview 4, Srinagar, 7 October 2014). A school teacher from Pulwama explained that 'my father is paralyzed since last nine years. [He] couldn't take medicines for many days because all the medicines were washed away and they were not able to buy new medicines' (Interview 17, Pulwama, 10 October 2014). Other respondents described similar problems of elderly heart patients and diabetics suffering without medication for days (Interview 8, Srinagar, 24 October 2014 and Interview 9, Srinagar, 13 October 2014).

Thirdly, many families became separated in the circumstances, and, due to the collapse of cellular telephone networks, remained without contact with one another for days or weeks. A middle-class family from Srinagar described: 'We were out of touch from my father and brother and it was only after a month that we were able to contact each other' (Interview 27, Srinagar, 5 November 2014). A half-widow who lost contact with her son for 11 days spoke of this and described: 'Later we found him in a different camp... I do not know how we managed to spend those days without him' (Interview 2, Srinagar, 10 December 2014).

Overall, seven of the 50 families interviewed, predominantly from urban Srinagar, lost contact with one or more household member for an extended period.

State Failure

The government did not offer any help neither for rescuing us nor for the relief distribution. (Interview 44, Anantnag, 7 November 2014).

Closely related to the lack of warning and preparation was a second narrative about the widespread collapse of all branches of the administration during the first two weeks of the flood. Across socio-economic status and geographical location, there was an overwhelming consensus about the absence and incompetence of the state. This was to some extent what people expected, and the responses reflect pre-existing attitudes borne out of experience and reproduced anew here with fresh evidence.

As the then chief minister Omar Abdullah himself conceded in a television interview: 'I had no government... My secretariat, the police headquarters, the control room, fire services, hospitals, all the infrastructure was under water' (Ghosh 2014, Yasir 2014a). Indeed, large numbers of politicians, bureaucrats and police were themselves trapped and in desperate circumstances. Many army camps, including Srinagar's Badami Bagh cantonment, were also heavily flooded, leading to an unusual absence of the normally heavy presence of security forces from the valley. A businessman from Anantnag described: 'there was no government agency active in the town for the first 15 days' (Interview 41, Anantnag, 21 November 2014).

A young, middle-class man from Srinagar explained:

Police, army and central as well as state government was missing from the scene. The role they played during the whole scene was dismal and unexpected. The most unfortunate thing was that the army for the first four or five days instead of rescuing the common people was busy evacuating their own men and left the people in utter deluge. (Interview 7, Srinagar, 15 October 2014)

An agricultural labourer from Tral who lost his house made a similar observation: 'State government was itself helpless, central government reacted late, state police was not visible, army was trying to appease people with little help' (Interview 47, Pulwama, 23 October 2014).

Other respondents did note the presence and the role of the army, and to a lesser extent, the National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF) who were active in particular areas such as Srinagar's Shivpora, Rambagh and Indra Nagar. There was, however, no such appreciation extended to the state government from any of the respondents. Despite the personal efforts and frequent public appearances of the Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on the ground and on television, there was widespread criticism of the political, administrative and law enforcement machinery.

A farmer from the village of Beighpora described how 'the state government was almost missing in action, as if it did not exist' (Interview 16, Pulwama, 10 October 2014). A young woman from Anantnag whose father died of a heart attack while they were trapped and awaiting rescue spoke of how 'the government machinery was defunct in rescuing people.

Those who were rescued were left at the mercy of god' (Interview 44, Anantnag, 7 November 2014). A small shopkeeper from Kulgam noted that 'state government was not active at all during this period of despair' (Interview 45, Kulgam, 8 November 2014).

Urban, middle-class respondents from Srinagar, many of whom were themselves well-connected and from families of senior civil servants, were equally critical of the government. They described: 'We saw no one from the State or Central Government' (Interview 3, Srinagar, 12 October 2014); 'I didn't see even a single government official in our area during or after the floods. Even our MLA is yet to pay us a visit' (Interview 10, Srinagar, 15 October 2014); 'There was no sign of any government agency or any other government personnel being available for help. The government was missing and defunct' (Interview 1, Srinagar, 7 October 2014); and 'The government even failed to clean our link roads. The trash and residue was cleared a month later on the eve of Eid' (Interview 11, Srinagar, 15 October 2014).

Military versus Local Youth

With the effective collapse of the state government and administration during the first few days of the flood, how then did hundreds of thousands of trapped people in the valley get rescued and find relief? The Indian national media's coverage emphasised and projected the role of the large Indian military presence in the state. In the days after the floods, Indian television viewers saw vivid images of trapped civilians being rescued and air-lifted to safety in large coordinated missions (Operation Megh Rahat and Operation Sadbhavna) by army and air force personnel, as well as by the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF). Official press releases describe over 200,000 people rescued by the armed forces, and indeed, flood

victims mentioned this. A middle-class woman from Kulgam described: 'People were rescued by locals and army without any bias...army also provided some food and blankets' (Interview 45, Kulgam, 11 August 2014). In Rambagh, Srinagar, we heard: 'Most of the families in our area were evacuated by the NDRF teams' (Interview 8, Srinagar, 24 October 2014); and in Indra Nagar 'We were rescued by the army... The rescue in our area was mainly done by army, NDRF and JK Police' (Interview 37, Srinagar, 5 November 2014).

But while the Indian army may well have played an important role, the interviewees, as well as a considerable body of evidence from media, NGO and other observers, suggest that the role of the army was in reality limited in relation to the vast scale of the problem at hand. In contrast, a far greater number, amounting to the large majority of affected people, appear to have been assisted by impromptu groups of local volunteers, a fact which was widely described in the local media but rarely in the national media. A young woman from Srinagar stated: 'I think I saw only one institution at work during the floods and that was the local volunteers. No one else in my eyes has done anything' (Interview 9, Srinagar, 13 October 2014).

Another young woman from Srinagar captured the broad sentiment on this issue:

Media manufactured the truth about the floods and portrayed as if everything was army. We are not denying [or saying] that army didn't do anything but they were not the only people who did everything. (Interview 3, Srinagar, 12 October 2014)

Of our limited sample of 50 households, 27 left their houses and escaped the floods by themselves, and 5 stayed at home. Of the remaining 18 households who were actually

rescued by others, 14 of these rescues were attributed to local volunteers. Of the remaining four, only one family reported being rescued by the army, and one other by the NDRF, while the remaining two were rescued by their relatives.

This confirms a wide body of anecdotal evidence, as well as the findings of an earlier study on the floods by a group of student volunteers which found that 96% of people in shelters reported being rescued by local volunteers (Rapid Assessment People's Report 2014). Local media reports from the Kashmir valley-based media in the aftermath of the floods provide sporadic and episodic evidence of this phenomenon. One report described how a group of 300 youth rescued 20,000 people (Rising Kashmir 2014b). Another report highlights the role of a group of young volunteers who rescued 1,500 villagers (Rising Kashmir 2014c).

The role of local volunteers in Kashmir was acknowledged even within the hierarchy of the Indian army, even while the Indian media obscured it. As the northern army commander General D.S. Hooda noted:

The task in Srinagar was too enormous and whatever the relief agencies (army, air force NDRF) could do would still not be enough. This is where we have to acknowledge the efforts of local volunteers who have contributed immensely. (Ashraf 2014)

There is only anecdotal information available about the identity and organizational networks behind the numerous volunteer groups credited with most of the relief work. For the most part, they appear to be highly localized, fragmented and impromptu collectives of young males who formed and dispersed spontaneously. Their effectiveness came from a

combination of localised knowledge, personal links and high levels of commitment. But beyond the realities of their effectiveness, the identification and attribution of credit to the local Kashmiri youth volunteers compared to the Indian military is significant and has meaning in itself, and requires some expansion. In the deeply divided, insurgency-prone political landscape of Kashmir, these two categories of relief workers correspond in other circumstances to the opposing camps of protagonists who confront one another in the everyday business of conflict. Young Kashmiri males have been at the centre of armed militancy against the state since 1990, and continue to be subject to heightened levels of scrutiny and surveillance. The archetypal 'angry young man' of Kashmir has emerged as the iconic image of popular resistance against the Indian security forces, most recently in a summer of stone-pelting against the security forces which erupted sporadically across the cities and towns of the valley in 2010. In the light of this, it was striking how respondents in our study across class, geographical and educational divides in the valley unanimously identified the ubiquitous 'youth volunteers' as responsible for their safe evacuation, often contrasting their effectiveness with the ineffectiveness of the state administration and security forces.

In the villages of south Kashmir, people described how 'everyone in our locality was rescued by local volunteers and villagers who carried old aged people on their shoulders' (Interview 19, Bijbehara, 10 November 2014). In the nearby village of Batengoo: 'All the people were rescued by local people in small makeshift boats. There was no one else to help except these boys (Interview 44, Batengoo, 7 November 2014). A barber from Kulgam who lost his house similarly recounted how 'nobody visited our village during the times of flood. Only local people helped each other (Interview 43, Kulgam, 7 November 2014). Even in the very

different world of urban, educated, middle-class respondents from the affluent suburbs of Srinagar, the message was strikingly similar and uniform: 'Had the local Kashmiri volunteers not helped, people would have died like animals' (Interview 1, Srinagar, 7 October 2014).

A milk shop owner from Srinagar who lost his livelihood in the floods explained:

All the family members were rescued by local volunteers from the old town. And these are the same boys whom the police calls stone-pelters. I think had these boys not come with these hand-made boats we all would have died slowly in our homes without food and water. (Interview 12, Srinagar, 9 October 2014)

Local volunteer groups were also widely credited as the most active in organizing relief and assistance to the large numbers of displaced people: 'The local volunteers from the old town did a tremendous job in arranging food and accommodation for people' (Interview 4, Srinagar, 7 October 2014). Several respondents, particularly in Srinagar, noted the role of activists from the separatist Hurriyat coalition, and particularly the woman's organization Dukhtaran-e-Millat in providing relief to affected families.

While many respondents described rescue-and-relief efforts by the army, NDRF, NGOs such as Oxfam, Save the Children and Action Aid, and voluntary donations from other parts of India, there was an unmistakable emphasis on and affection for local efforts over the national or the international. Alongside the local youth and Hurriyat activists, Kashmiri narratives of the flood recalled local philanthropic donations, town organisations, or trusts such as the Yateem Trust or Agha Syed Yousuf Memorial Trust. Several respondents noted the role of Kashmiri student organisations in Delhi and elsewhere in India. A middle-aged labourer from

Srinagar who had lost his ancestral property and all his documents reported that 'People had come from far-off districts like Baramulla, Ganderbal and Badipora to help others in the time of need. People brought boats, food, and utensils and bedding. Kashmir has never seen this kind of volunteerism. (Interview 15, Srinagar, 9 October 2014)

This is not to suggest that the Indian army was inactive after the floods, but rather that its role requires a more nuanced explanation. The only account available of the role of the Indian army during the floods is from an academic researcher who had the opportunity to interact and observe the army at close quarters. Vasundhara Sirinate describes how the army had indeed been very active in the first few days of the floods, but then stopped after rescue teams were pelted with stones:

The 162nd Battalion was instrumental in much of the rescue effort, but all of it lasted barely nine days. After incidents of stone-pelting were reported, the rescue boats were stopped. Officers and soldiers did work long hours not only rescuing people but also sheltering them...Then the stone-pelting incidents happened, for reasons that lie at an intersection of politics and resistance, and the equation changed. (Sirinate 2014)

Bias in Rescue and Relief

The priority was first the politicians, then the bureaucrats, then the non-locals and the number of the common men came last in the last. [Interview 6, Srinagar, 7 October 2014).

The contentious politics of disaster relief revolves heavily around perceptions of unequal treatment and unfairness in rescue and relief provision. Victims of the Kashmir flood spoke of a number of complaints of unfair treatment, although it must be said that overall this was an issue emphasized by a minority, and most respondents either did not speak of this issue or did not find there was any unfair treatment. Indeed, people were more disturbed by the incompetence and inadequacy of the government rather than by any bias. However, those who articulated their sense of bias in relief provision fell within two distinct types, which to some extent contradicted one another.

Firstly, a number of respondents from the villages of south Kashmir complained that media attention, relief and rehabilitation assistance were being targeted to the urban, wealthier residents of Srinagar. A disabled man from a village in Anantnag who suffered the collapse of this house in the floods explained:

They only concentrated on the city without realizing that people also lived in villages, and they were also stranded, too. There should have been efforts to save all the people of Kashmir not just people in Srinagar. (Interview 23, Arweni, 13 October 2014.)

A farmer from Dangerpora in Pulwama, whose village was completely submerged, similarly said:

All the relief material which came from outside was given to the people in Srinagar city. In villages people only got help from nearby villages. Majority of the parts from south Kashmir were flooded but those areas where flood had not come helped.

(Interview 17, Dangerpora, 10 October 2014)

Others in south Kashmir attributed the problem variously to the concentration of national media attention, as well as of army and NDRF deployment in Srinagar (Interview 41, Anantnag, 21 November 2014 and Interview 22, Bijbehara, 11 October 2014).

However, in Srinagar itself, respondents were oblivious to this issue, and instead complained of a different kind of bias they perceived directed towards tourists and influential people. A city businessman charged that 'the priority was first the politicians, then the bureaucrats, then the non-locals, and the number of the common man came in the last. (Interview 6, Srinagar, 7 October 2014). Another respondent spoke bitterly of how 'high level government officials, political affiliates, security and defense personnel as well as the tourists and outsiders were the prime priority of the rescuers all the time. We were left to fend for ourselves (Interview 36, Srinagar, 5 November 2014).

These accusations became widespread during the floods, and the army commander General D.S. Hooda countered them publicly by arguing that a large part of the army personnel in charge of rescue and relief in Srinagar were Kashmiri themselves. 'Could we have issued orders to them to save non-Kashmiris first?' (Ashraf 2014). At any rate, given the magnitude of the disaster, and the admittedly modest role played by the army under those circumstances, it would seem reasonable to suggest that even if such bias did exist it would in itself not have affected the outcomes for the majority of people. The perception remains, however, among a sizeable minority; as one respondent put it: 'The influential people, elite class and outsiders were prioritized on every front' (Interview 7, Srinagar, 15 October 2014).

Media Accounts

Aside from the lack of preparation, collapse of the state administration, and the role of local volunteers, the fourth major narrative to emerge among flood victims was the role of the media. As with other recent disasters in India, such as the 2013 Uttarakhand floods or Cyclone Phailin in Odisha, television journalism played an essential role in broadcasting the gravity of the disaster and the extent of human suffering to a nation-wide audience, helping to mobilise awareness, support and assistance. By holding a critical lens to the role of government agencies in the relief efforts, the media has also enhanced the transparency and accountability of these institutions in situations of abject crisis. Much the same happened in Kashmir, as national television crews conveyed the distant suffering of people in a peripheral, conflict-torn, mountainous region, to the country at large.

However, interviewees in Kashmir itself drew a sharp distinction between the role of the local versus national media. People spoke positively about the role of local Kashmir-based journalists, many of whom were themselves victims of the disaster and were working under conditions of considerable personal distress and adversity:

Media played a very positive role during the floods. It was they who kept tracking the developments and helped the government and volunteers steer their operations.

There were many instances wherein the media personnel left their work aside and joined hands with the volunteers for the help of people. (Interview 7, Srinagar, 15 October 2014)

This was markedly different from perceptions of the national New Delhi-based media. There are of course wide differences in reporting among the range of different television, print, and

electronic media outlets, but most respondents remembered and spoke largely of what they found was the most objectionable and offensive. Often carried into the disaster sites in army or air force transportation, the national media reported widely on the disaster and helped mobilise awareness and relief aid from around India. But they also tended to emphasize the positive contribution of the Indian military within which they were embedded. New Delhi-based journalists who flew in to report on the disaster transmitted vivid footage and first-hand accounts of the disaster, and also of the rescue of Kashmiri civilians by Indian soldiers.

The significance of this coverage became apparent in two ways. Firstly, national journalists who reported on the disaster and the role of the Indian military found it impossible to report the flood without reference to its potential political implications. In the voice-overs behind the live coverage, and in the evening news discussion programmes which followed, it was this larger political issue which the debates centred around. Would this humanitarian effort by the Indian military, the journalists asked, not positively transform the hitherto fraught relationship between the military and civilian population?

Secondly, positive footage of the Indian military shown by the national media contrasted with conspicuously negative coverage of the Kashmir valley's separatist political leaders, who were often portrayed either as impotent demagogues, or as cunning opportunists seeking to capitalize upon and gain false credit from the disaster.

Yasin Malik, leader of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and one of the most prominent separatist leaders in the valley, was at one point charged by Indian national television news stations with hijacking a relief boat in order to be seen to distribute the relief

himself. Iftikhar Gilani, a senior Delhi-based Kashmiri journalist, revealed how he was asked to participate in this:

I got a call from a news channel wanting me to arrange visuals of the JKLF chairman Mohammad Yasin Malik rescued by the Army... It was of course another matter that Malik was sitting at his Maisuma home, and the tourists and labourers stranded in Lal Chowk were telling journalists that Malik was the only person who for seven days reached them with water and biscuits. (Gilani 2014)

Indeed, the national media coverage of the disaster has, after the failures of the Jammu and Kashmir state administration, become the most important focal point for public anger and resentment after the floods. As this young man from a middle-class family in Indra Nagar, Srinagar described:

Media manipulated things and fabricated the truth to show army in good light. But no reporter wanted to wet his feet in water to show the cruel reality – and that reality was that the army failed, the system failed. I am not saying that army did nothing, but it did not do what was being reported on TV. (Interview 1, Srinagar, 7 October 2014)

A respondent from the south Kashmir town of Anantnag dwelt on this this at length:

The media was showing repeatedly pictures of soldiers carrying people out of their homes... Tell me, can 70 helicopters can save two lakh [two hundred thousand] people? It was complete misrepresentation of facts... I am not saying army did nothing. NDRF and army – they did a great job. But what was the need to show? What was the need to take camera-persons with you to helicopters. (Interview 41, Anantnag, 21 November 2014)

Largely as a result of national media coverage, the abiding image of the 2014 floods which the rest of India outside Kashmir has been left with is one of Indian army soldiers rescuing desperate, but ultimately ungrateful, Kashmiri civilians. In contrast, the abiding impression that Kashmiris were left with is of a prejudiced Indian media which exploited a tragedy and misrepresented the reality in order to promote a positive image for the Indian army.

6. Conclusions: The Politics of Flood Disaster in Kashmir

There are six broad issues we distilled from the narratives of flood survivors. Firstly, despite the historical vulnerability of the Kashmir valley to floods, there was poor disaster planning or preparedness. Secondly, the state administration was revealed to be incompetent in preparing or responding effectively to the crisis. Thirdly, the narratives of relief and attribution of assistance were sharply divided along lines which corresponded to prior individual political sympathies. While Kashmiri flood victims tended to credit local volunteers, the Indian media largely credited the Indian military. Fourthly, the overwhelming majority of people appear to have been rescued by local volunteers, suggesting that the role of the Indian military was modest. Fifthly, people outside Srinagar felt that relief and media attention was unfairly directed at the capital, while people in Srinagar itself felt that tourists and VIPs were prioritized. Sixthly, Kashmiris deeply resented the way that the floods were presented on national television media, and viewed it as exploitative and distorted. The Indian media's coverage of the role of the military, in turn, created the impression elsewhere in India that Kashmiris were, despite having been rescued and cared for by the military, ungrateful for this.

What then can be said about the question posed at the beginning of this paper? Did the floods in Kashmir result in a politically transformative moment? What evidence is there to support this idea from the narratives of its survivors?

In Kashmir, as in other such cases, the disaster created a brief moment in which established relationships, hierarchies, rivalries and patterns of life were temporarily suspended, shaken and disturbed. Indeed, all the main actors involved – the army, state government, national government, state and national media, pro-independence politicians, local and national volunteer organizations, NGOs and Kashmiri civilians – already had long histories of interaction but were, because of the circumstances, forced to relate to and consider one another in different ways.

Within the first few days of the floods in Kashmir, there were already competing and confusing claims about who was responsible for the tragedy, and who was directing rescue operations and providing relief. There were widespread complaints on the ground that the state government was ineffective and absent. The media, particularly the New Delhi-based national media, tended to emphasize the positive role of the Indian armed forces and to suggest that this had transformed the army's relationship with the Kashmiri people. Interview responses instead suggested that local volunteers played a much more important role, and that the floods had if anything reinforced the mistrust and bitterness among the public towards the state apparatus.

In the weeks after the flood in October and November 2014, mounting public anger at the state government and its manifold failures took the form of numerous localised

demonstrations across the valley, often with very specific demands.¹ In elections to the state legislature, which were held on schedule just three months after the floods in December 2014, the ruling government of Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and his National Conference party lost power. The National Conference, which dominated state politics for the last six decades, was relegated to a distant third position. In other words, the political heat generated by the flood probably carried some impact on the election results. To this extent, the floods can be said to have constituted a tipping point of sorts, in which public anger catalyzed regime change.

But this in itself was far from a transformative outcome. Legislative re-balancing and the change of the state government in Jammu and Kashmir have limited importance given the scale of the larger unresolved issues and the dispute at hand. Alongside the ambivalence which Kashmiris hold towards their incorporation into India is a deep cynicism towards federated electoral democracy as an instrument of Indian rule. The real tipping point in contemporary Kashmiri political history occurred in the late 1980s, with the explosive outburst of a mass movement which rejected federalism within India in favour of separatism and radical insurgent militancy. In 2014, Kashmir was in a period of de-radicalization, still recovering from the extraordinarily traumatic consequences of militancy and the counter-insurgency.

While it would thus be premature to draw far-reaching conclusions, and bearing in mind the limitations of the evidence at hand, the simple answer to the question we posed is that the direct political consequences were limited. The floods served neither to catalyse radical

¹ See, for example, these reports during and after the floods: Rising Kashmir (2014a), and Yousuf (2014b).

change, nor did it unlock a transformative potential among the conflicting parties. Both were, in any event, unlikely outcomes. This is not to suggest that there are no political consequences of the floods – but, perhaps, that they operated in a more diffuse manner, through different channels.

For example, the floods provided revealing insights which were politically significant in themselves. The spontaneous rise of voluntarism, the dysfunctionalities of the state, the hypocrisy of the powerful, and the opportunism of politicians were all briefly and viscerally evident in their nakedness under emergency conditions. They served to provide Kashmiris with further evidence to confirm three widely held beliefs. Firstly, they provided evidence that the state government is ineffective and that the central government does not prioritise them. Secondly, it confirmed widely held perceptions that the Indian media is hostile to them, that it willfully distorts the reality of what happens in Kashmir. Thirdly, it reinforced the belief that their safety and well-being rests within elements of Kashmiri society itself, to whom they owe their lives and wellbeing. In their hour of need, Kashmiri society found and chose to remember that it was provided for largely by itself: by the public-spiritedness of young men, and by the generosity and benevolence of local philanthropy.

This answer from a farm labourer in Pulwama summarized what many felt that they had learned:

The real face of the institutions came to the surface during the floods. The state government remained a mute spectator. It seemed as if they had no clue what to do.

The national media used the floods as a platform to paint the Indian army as the saviour of the general public. The army was actually busy in rescuing the non-locals

and tourists, but Radio Kashmir Srinagar played an anchor role in connecting people.

The police appeared on the scene only when the dust had settled. (Interview 49, Aghanzpora, 23 October 2014)

The absence of an apparent ‘tipping point’ also points to the need to reformulate the relationship between natural disaster and political transformation in a different way, in order to see how it fits within the evidence in this case. The issue here is the way that different elements in the national and regional political constellations entered into a desperate competition to gain favourable media coverage, fashion public opinion, and construct narratives which would shape the historical memory of the event. Herein lies the possibility of a more productive approach to understanding the politics of natural disasters as they unfold.

Within the valley, numerous political actors sought to frame the disaster in terms of their own political compulsions. The parliamentary opposition parties in the state, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), were sharply critical of the failures of the National Conference (NC) led government of Chief Minister Omar Abdullah. The separatist leaders of the Hurriyat Conference, Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, made a number of public statements criticising the Indian government for its lack of interest in the floods, its prioritization of tourists and senior politicians in rescue missions, and the refusal to allow international humanitarian aid. The Pakistan-based chief of the United Jihad Council (UJC), Syed Salahuddin, while criticizing the role of the Indian government, also announced a suspension of militant operations in sympathy with the affected people of Kashmir (Rising Kashmir 2014d)..

In other words, what is perhaps more important than the measurable political outcomes due to the flood is the way that many actors, including the national media, expected that it *would* be politically significant and transformative. As a result, they sought to gain from it, to enact meaningful political performances to be recorded for posterity, and to extract political impact from their actions.

Media coverage from New Delhi dwelt at length not just on visual images of the army's relief efforts, but also with follow-up evening panel discussion programmes dedicated entirely to debating whether this act of charity would transform the relationship between the army and Kashmiris, leading Kashmiris to value the Indian army more. What was being openly suggested was that Kashmiris ought to be grateful for the army's generosity, and thus transform themselves into loyal Indians.

This 'ambivalent feeling of gratitude' that Hollenbach and Ruwanpura (2011: 21) describe of the recipients of post-disaster aid has acute resonance in Kashmir because the gift in question was widely viewed as a Trojan horse. The great ambivalence that Kashmiris felt towards the relief and rehabilitation provided by the army and various wings of the Indian state is precisely because it was readily understood as being potentially transformed into a social debt, the repayment of which required them to accept and embrace India unambiguously. Not unsurprisingly, most respondents instead chose to identify, appreciate and remember the role of local Kashmiri youth volunteers: a group to whom no such odious debt was attached.

As such, the analysis of the political consequences of natural disasters must take into account a model which is more complicated than that of a causal chain from natural disaster to transformative political outcomes. What complicates the model is that this rationale is internalised by the agents who populate it, and thus serves to guide their strategic actions and inactions on the ground. All those who are conscious of the political profit to be reaped from a disaster will seek to anticipate, pre-empt and influence events, images and narratives in the hope of instrumentalising the disaster to their advantage. The social stage of post-disaster environments are populated by such actions of reinvention and narrative control.

In conclusion, we mention in brief two broader consequences which this study offers for the politics of disasters. Firstly, it speaks to the way in which disasters serve as a lens. Moments of such sudden breakdown act to lift the veil of normality and provide a rare moment of clarity into the workings of power and the social relationships which govern people's lives, rendering the status quo painfully visible. Whether or not this goes on to coalesce into a political 'tipping point', the process that ensues is one which separates emperors from their clothing.

Secondly, it speaks to the relevance of performativity, perception and imaginaries as the pathways through which disasters result in new outcomes. While the transformative political potential of disasters can be exaggerated, and is to be taken with caution, this idea is nevertheless valuable insofar as it forms the calculus within which performances of relief and benevolence are enacted, and is the reason why they are also resisted in the social construction of conflicting disaster narratives and public memory.

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