

Digging Under The Rubble



3 December 2005: Precarious constructions are so commonplace that a casual walk underneath causes no concern. Ballakot, Pakistan.

Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World

To be more effective, the media needs to look within at where it has compromised on the basic skills that are part of every journalist's tool kit. These are needed at all times, in all kinds of reporting. But when reporting on extraordinary situations, they became absolutely essential to do a competent job of communicating a disaster truthfully and in all its dimensions.

Kalpana Sharma

On 26 January 2001, when an earthquake that measured 6.9 on the Richter Scale hit the western state of Gujarat and flattened large parts of Kutch, the desert district bordering Pakistan, it took national media over 24 hours to reach the district capital city of Bhuj. The earthquake had knocked down cellular phone towers and telephone lines. There was no electricity. And therefore few knew the extent of the devastation. Even the offices of the District Collector, the chief administrative officer, had been destroyed.

One of the first commercial flights from Mumbai that flew in essential aid to the region also carried with it a handful of journalists. I was one of those who managed to fight my way onto that flight.

What we saw in the 24 hours after we landed are scenes none of us will forget. Disasters have a way of writing themselves into your memory, etching unlikely details that spring up when you pause to think about them. In the rush of reportage, these details are often overlooked. In those 24 hours, all one could do was absorb and record. Reporting was impossible until we got back to Mumbai on the return flight the next day. Our stories could convey only first impressions.

The bigger challenge came a week later when electricity was restored, phone lines were working and the national and international media had established

themselves in the flattened town of Bhuj. How much detail do you report? How many photographs of crumpled buildings can you send? How many people who have lost family can you speak to before you get a good enough idea of what had happened? How many stories do you narrate of people who had lost entire families, people who were maimed and badly injured, people who could not trace their families? Do you rely on what officials tell you or do you personally go and double check each fact despite immense logistical problems?

None of this is unfamiliar to journalists covering anything beyond the routine beats in cities. There are constant challenges of getting facts, verifying them, making sure you have enough information, that you talk to an adequate number of people, that you get all sides of the story, that you get human interest, etc. And that you meet your deadline.

You come across villages where not a twig moves. Moonscapes. No sound. Only the stench of bodies that lie buried under the mounds of rubble. There are others where people have survived. Like one settlement where each house seems to be sliced in half, leaving it exposed, like a row of cardboard houses on display. You watch the inhabitants patiently attempting to rescue what they can from the ruins. And as you stand by and watch, you talk to some of them. I asked a young woman what she

remembered of January 26 even as she sifted through a trunk with some of her clothes. She said nothing at first. Then she looked curiously at me and asked, "What is your caste?" I could not believe the question. Yet, that is what she asked me. Why, I asked, did she need to know? Just wondered, she said, as she went back to sorting out her clothes.

Social history relevant

I remember this incident because it revealed to me another aspect of any reporting, even of disasters. That the social history of a region comes into play regardless of the immediate story. So people might have lost everything, but in this part of Gujarat, as elsewhere in the state, your caste counts. And it doesn't get erased just because nature has ignored caste and dealt everyone a

similar blow.

Religion also counts, as we soon realised. So even if Muslims and Hindus had lived peacefully together for generations, disaster created cleavages as sectarian



Omidous Alam/DRINKNEWS/Majority World

Gaibandha district is connected with three rivers Ghagot, Brahmaputra and Teesta. Every day the water level of these rivers is increasing and has crossed the terrible level reached during the '88 flood. 20 villages have been inundated with flood water affecting 2 lac people. They take shelter in the highland. Getting water for drinking and cooking becomes almost impossible. They have to depend on dry food. In some remote areas people do not get any help, like boat for transfer to a safe shelter, from any one. Gaibandha, Bangladesh. 1 August 2007.



Tanvir Ahmed/DirikNEWS/Majority World

Flood affected people wait for relief in a flood shelter center. Hundreds of flood affected people suffer from lack of food and drinking water. Basaba, Dhaka, Bangladesh. 13 August 2007.

groups set about providing relief to only their own kind. And political parties that had built their base on caste and religious divides went about building new townships with clearly demarcated areas for different communities and castes. The story then was not a simple “developmental” kind, with disaster, relief and rehabilitation. It was interlaced with caste, community and politics.

This is precisely why reporting on disasters – natural or human induced – is so demanding. It has all the excitement and immediacy of covering an event. You are guaranteed page one! But it also has layer upon layer of complexity, of histories that have to be dug out from under the rubble, of policies that have to be unearthed that make the current and future tasks more difficult, of understanding the interconnectedness and fissures that predate a disaster but impact what follows it.

If you take into account such layering, reporting on disasters can be much more nuanced. Otherwise, once the emergency ends, it turns into another routine story, of daily briefings by the “authorities” on relief and rehabilitation, on the work of international aid organisations and NGOs, on the final death count, of the state of the injured, etc. Survey media coverage of any natural disaster, and you will find this change of tone setting in within a couple of weeks. Not only do the stories disappear from the front page, as they are bound to do given the compulsions of the news business, but often they vanish altogether.

The reason for this, I would suggest, is as much the way the media functions as the absence of imagination of reporters assigned to cover the disaster. And one reason for this, I think, is because journalists have stopped being “generalists”. Gone are the days when, as part of formal education, we were taught “General

Knowledge” or GK. We were supposed to be curious and interested in everything if we wanted to be counted as a good journalist. Life, nature, science, politics, economics, social structures – all this was supposed to be a part of our essential kit along with writing skills.

The problem with an absence of GK, as I call it, or plain old homework about the region you are assigned to cover, is that journalists fail to see stories that are staring them in the face. The excuse is lack of time. But in the age of the Internet, where information is there for the asking, surely such an excuse does not count.

What lies beneath

Much of disaster reporting sounds and reads the same because the reporters only see what is in front of them, not what lies behind the mounds of rubble, figuratively speaking. What was this region before it became this disaster area? How were social relations between different groups? What was its history? What were its relations with the state government? Was it neglected or was it favoured? How important was it to the politics of the state?

These questions are examples of the many other, but essential, dimensions of reporting on disasters that are often not part of discussions that look at how media communicates disasters. Just as gender is overlooked, so is much else. These are oversights in general reporting, exacerbated when it comes to disaster reporting.

Another example that comes to mind is the inundation of large parts of the Indian commercial capital, Mumbai on 26 July 2005 when a cloud burst brought 944 mm of rain on the city within 12 hours. Even the most efficient drainage system would not have sufficed to drain out this downpour. Mumbai has

a dismal storm water system that can barely cope with routine monsoon rains. So the city almost drowned: over 400 people died; life came to a standstill for 48 hours; there were no trains, buses, no electricity and water; the airport was closed; and the roads were jammed with cars that had stalled.

During these 48 hours, the broadcast media, the multiple 24-hour news channels, went into over-drive. Unable to reach many areas, they chose to telecast old footage without explaining to viewers that these had not been updated. Apart from misinformation, this spread panic. It also undercut the credibility of the media.

It did not help that the government was unprepared and did not have a proper disaster management system in place. But it was also evident that much of the media was not prepared for disaster coverage and was floundering. It is ordinary people, citizen journalists, who came to the rescue by phoning in information and visuals.

A little known river

The disaster exposed inadequacies in both the media and government. It seemed the rain forced both to take note of a river called the Mithi! In fact, this river, which has now been reduced to little more than a dirty narrow drain, has always existed, slicing Mumbai into two halves. But few reporters knew of its existence, or its importance for the city. The fact that it provided natural drainage. Or that the city's development had ignored this and reclaimed immeasurably important mangroves to build swank office buildings. That the airport had changed the course of the river to meet its requirements for an extension to a runway. And that no one, including the media, had noticed or commented when all this happened, many years before 2005.

So when the rain came down on 26 July 2005, the poor Mithi struggled to push out the water. It had to face the high tide from the Arabian Sea, into which it drained out. So instead of taking water out, it became the conduit for huge quantities of seawater coming in, even as its banks overflowed from the rain. The result: complete and sudden flooding in areas all along the river, including the airport.

The Mithi story is another important illustration about the need for journalists to be generalists, to have GK. Any reporter worth his or her salt covering a city like Mumbai should have been aware of the importance of the Mithi to the city. Within a few hours, they could have pinned down the reason for the flooding. Instead it took days, for both authorities and the media, to understand what had happened.

From my own experience of reporting on disasters I can cite many such examples to underline again the importance of training journalists to understand linkages – between the environment and disasters, between developmental policies and disasters, between socio-economic conditions (which would necessarily include the position of women and other marginalised communities) and disasters, and between local politics and disasters.

Following up stories

Apart from reporting in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, what about follow up? This is an eternal question that most media practitioners face. For how long do you pursue a disaster story? For weeks, months, and on every anniversary? There is clearly no formula. It depends on the media.

But once media scrutiny disappears, attention to the area also lapses. While the routine work of reconstruction continues, the people falling between the cracks go virtually unnoticed. Until a civil society organisation brings this to the notice of the media. The history of post-disaster work in India has many examples that show that those historically marginalised often slip further back into deprivation after a natural calamity. Constant media scrutiny and follow up can help expose the gaps between professed intentions and actual performance of governments and aid givers and in the long-term aid those most needing help.

To conclude, there is no question that in an age when the media seems not just to be omnipresent but almost omniscient, its role in communicating disasters and playing an important role as a way of two-way communication between affected communities and the government is central. The term media now encompasses not just the mainstream – print, broadcast and radio, etc. – but also new media, blogs, ham radio and increasingly the tribe of citizen journalists who have become such a key source of information and images during and after a disaster.

To be more effective, the media needs to look within at where it has compromised on the basic skills that ought to be part of every journalist's tool kit. These are needed at all times, in all kinds of reporting. But when reporting on extraordinary situations, like the 2004 Asian Tsunami, or the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, these skills became absolutely essential to do a competent job of communicating truthfully and in all its dimensions, the extent of a disaster.

Disasters should make media stop and reassess its capabilities, and work to refurbish them -- before it is hit by another disaster.