

Disaster Management and Participatory Governance in the Eastern Himalayan Region: Experiences from the Darjeeling hills

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Abstract

The recent Nepal earthquake that claimed hundreds of life and caused colossal damage is yet another grim reminder of the fact that, despite all our claims to progress in science and technology, human society is perennially at risk to disasters. The apparent threat of climate change and global warming only deepen our vulnerability and risks. The Darjeeling hills, situated along the Eastern Himalayan region, have been prone to natural hazards such as landslides, hurricanes, and earthquakes, among others. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study undertaken in the Darjeeling Municipality region. Primary data was collected using, interviews involving 60 participants, focus group discussions, and participant observations. Findings show that i) the state administration as well as the Darjeeling municipality is inadequately prepared to respond to natural disasters in the region; ii) Various institutions responding to disaster are working in isolation with one another, and therefore the collective resource is not optimally utilized; and iii) the administrative response to disaster management in the region is inherently bureaucratic, top-down, and technocratic in orientation that does not take cognizance of local participation in the decision-making processes. Drawing on the insights from the discourses on participation in politics and in development studies, this paper makes a case for shifting the focus back to the community and argues that inclusion of traditional, non-formal, grassroots level governance structure like *samaj* and *bhajan-mandali* is key to developing a collaborative disaster mitigation and management mechanism, which can in turn help address the democratic deficit within the present disasters management system that is currently found to be bureaucratic and top-down in approach

Introduction

It is, today, widely accepted that degradation of mountain ecosystems is a global problem. The Himalayas, endowed with a unique and serene natural magnificence, abundant resources, perennial rivers, besides being a store house of rare species of flora and fauna, also constitutes one of the most threatened ecosystems in the world (Ahmad, 1993). Given its fragile geological profile, the Himalayas are known to be vulnerable to various environmental hazards and disasters of different kind, nature and magnitude. Among others, earthquakes, landslides, snow avalanches, floods, debris flows, epidemics and fires, have been the most common causes of death, damage and destructions in the Himalayas (Gardner and Dekens, 2007).

The mountain areas have become increasingly disaster-prone with a disproportionately higher number of disasters as compared with other environments. (Hewitt 1997 in Gardner and Dekens, 2007) The Himalayan mountain ranges are geophysically active and unstable structure that are highly susceptible to slope instability, and are marked with

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rugged topography, fragile rock conditions, high seismicity³, and high rainfall (National Disaster Management Authority, 2009). These geological characteristics have made the Himalayan ranges highly vulnerable to large-scale tectonic movements, landslides, and to the processes of surface removal. (Tiwari, 2008) Beside these ingrained natural hazardous processes, the Himalayas have also been subject to human interventions – the livelihood and development activities across the Himalayas have deepened and enlarged the risk and vulnerability of the region.

Participation and Disaster Management

The shift to a participatory approach towards disaster management has been propelled by a growing realisation in other domains of policy where the failure of state-only and market-only approaches (Warner et al., 2002) along with, as Lemos and Agrawal has observed,

the capacity of communities and other small-scale social formations to manage resources has provided...a shift toward comanagement, community-based natural resource management, and environmental policy decentralizations. (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006: 303)

In concert with these changes in the overall policy orientation, the scope of disaster management has also widened to change from traditional and often exclusive emergency services to a far wider consortium of agencies, skills and practices (Britton, 2001).

The “paradigm shift” from reactive, response-based disaster management to a more proactive effort aimed at disaster mitigation and risk reduction (Henstra and McBean, 2005) has also meant “a shift that involves a viable role for public participation” (Pearce, 2003: 212) involving a more inclusive approach by encouraging the participation of communities, non-governmental organisations, environmental groups, educational institutions, and other stakeholders in disaster mitigation and management. It has been acknowledged that while a top-down policy is needed, it is the local-level bottom-up policy that provides the impetus for the implementation of mitigation strategies and a successful disaster management process. (Pearce, 2003) In fact, as Warner et al., reflecting on the changing trend in international disaster management effort has observed

public and stakeholder participation and local action are deemed necessary for the new focus on risk reduction, institutional reform and capacity building. (Warner et al., 2002: 8)

Within the context of disaster management, Warner et al. suggests that “public participation in its broadest sense concerns the inclusion of the people who have a stake in disaster management”. (2002: 13) It is believed that to be effective, participation of the vulnerable communities in disaster preparedness is a necessary ingredient. (Newport and Jawahar, 2003) Disaster, to be sure, has differential impacts on the people with the effect that certain sections are more susceptible to hazards; and in the event of disaster, are rendered even more vulnerable.

³ Himalayas are categorised in IV and V seismic zones rated as highly prone to earthquakes (National Disaster Management Authority, 2009).

The participation of the vulnerable community in the disaster mitigation process, therefore, constitutes a prime component. (Newport and Jawahar, 2003) However, often it is found that affected populations are viewed as victims which not only connotes a state of dependency of affected people, but also overlooks people's own capacities and coping strategies. (Warner et al., 2002)

Addressing this lacuna, created by the bureaucratic top-down approach to disaster, has brought forth the solution in the form of community based disaster management which takes the '*vulnerable*' community as the reference point in disaster management. Building safer communities, after all, hinges upon understanding the communities and their vulnerability to natural hazards (Chen et al., 2006); and, as communities are considered "the best judges of their own vulnerability and can make the best decisions regarding their well being" (Yodmani, 2001: 8), their participation in the overall disaster management planning and implementation assumes paramount importance.

Further, approaching the problem of disaster through community is beneficial to government. Depending on the type or size of a disaster, governments' emergency services might lack time to act instantly in the immediate aftermath of disaster when communities can play a significant role in responding to disaster. (Chen et al., 2006) There is, indeed, a great deal about Community Based Disaster Management (CBDM hereafter) approach than this occasional advantage. CBDM aims at addressing the vulnerabilities and strengthening "people's capacity to cope with hazards" (Yodmani, 2001: 8). The causes of vulnerability to disaster, within the CBDM framework, are discussed by the community and action is aimed at the reduction of disaster risks. (Ikeda, 2009)

The success of disaster management depends, to a great extent, on mitigation measures; this entails undertaking adequate hazard, risk and vulnerability (HRV) analyses in the absence of which communities "may neglect to plan for the hazards", thereby failing to achieve sustainable hazard mitigation. (Pearce, 2005: 413) The hazard, impact, risk and vulnerability (HIRV) analysis advanced by Pearce (2005) is one of the efforts aimed at achieving sustainable hazard mitigation. A community and region-based model, HIRV is premised upon local knowledge supplemented by experts; provides a platform in the form of HIRV Committee which facilitates community participation involving such participants as emergency manager, local resident, business community, representatives from industry and environmental organizations, disaster experts, media, representatives from the third sector (vulnerable populations), among others; and, entrusted with the task of hazard identification, risk analysis, vulnerability analysis, impact analysis, and risk management; HIRV analysis helps in expanding the terrain of disaster mitigation and management to develop sustainable mitigative strategies *vis-à-vis* hazards by encouraging community participation.

Within the context of HIRV analysis, the participation of different stakeholders is essential in providing diverse and critical inputs that are often overlooked or deemed 'insignificant'; and, together with the 'experts' knowledge, may enhance and augment disaster mitigation strategies. Further, the HIRV analysis goes a long way in securing "the political will of the elected officials" that determines the adoption or otherwise of mitigative strategies in that it can "assist politicians in determining how the voters will judge their actions regarding whether or not mitigative strategies are implemented" .(Pearce, 2005: 429) Suffice it to say that HIRV model encapsulates the significance of community participation in disaster mitigation mechanism and to the extent it resolves the participation deficit, may accomplish a comprehensive community-oriented disaster management.

Identifying vulnerabilities of the community is, however, one facet of disaster preparedness. It is equally, rather more, important to address their capability to cope with disaster. Newport and Jawahar holds that building the capacities of community in coping mechanism can foster a “*self-reliant community*” which requires all the possible resource to make it more sustainable (2003: 33). These capacities are related to, among others, awareness generation among the people at the village level, community mobilization, mending weak community structures, and building task force trained in both pre- and post- disaster management skills (Newport and Jawahar, 2003).

In order to meet the above challenges and to facilitate a more robust and comprehensive disaster management system, a variety of new factors and forces are emerging that mark today’s ‘*disaster-scape*’, prompting a major paradigm shift involving new actors. (Gopalakrishnan & Okada, 2007, 368) These include, as Okada observes

an emerging role of NGOs; innovative schemes of public–private partnership; increasing importance of citizen-initiatives; institutionalised participatory process for multiple-stakeholders; public information as common goods and its release to society and stakeholders; and growing concerns for public risk and increasing need for integrated risk management. (Okada, 2003: 6 quoted in Gopalakrishnan & Okada, 2007: 368)

Ironically, though, Waugh and Streib find modern emergency management as presenting a paradox. (2006) They believe that “emergency response requires meticulous organization and planning, but on the other hand, it is spontaneous”. (Waugh and Streib, 2006: 131) This paradox has led to a growing realisation that no agency or organization, public or private, can by itself manage the complexities and challenges of disaster. The need is therefore to work together around shared goals and visions. Towards this end, a plethora of agencies – government, non-governmental organisations, international donor agencies, environmental groups, communities and other organisations – have directed their efforts to build a common platform that could be effective in dealing with disasters. The trend is, therefore, towards collaborative management of disaster.

Darjeeling – A Brief Background

Darjeeling, the northernmost district of West Bengal state of India, is a part of the Hindu-Kush Himalayas⁴ and the only hill district in the state. The topography of Darjeeling district is unique in its own way. Of the four sub-divisions, Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong are covered by hilly terrain and mountains, while Siliguri comprise of plain areas. In terms of topography, climate and population, the three Hills sub-division stands distinct vis-à-vis Siliguri. The Darjeeling–Himalayan ranges present a storehouse of biodiversity, where flora and fauna vary extensively with climatic variation from one region to another. (Das, 2009) Darjeeling, famous for its colloquial tea and tourism, besides timber, is also equally notorious for its disasters. The recent landslides that claimed around 40 lives in

⁴ The Hindu Kush-Himalayan region consists of four distinct mountain systems: Hindu Kush Mountains in the west, the Karakoram in the north-west, the Himalayas in the east, and the Hengduan in the north-east (Bhadra and Khana, 2002).

different regions of Darjeeling Hills, and the 2009 Aila cyclone⁵, is another reminder of Darjeeling's vulnerability to disasters. To be sure, Darjeeling has a long history of disasters. The Ambootia landslide (1968), located on the picturesque tea garden-clad hill slopes around Kurseong, for instance, is considered as the largest landslide in Asia (National Disaster Management Authority, 2009).

Disaster Management in Darjeeling Municipality

Darjeeling Municipality does not have a single department/organisation solely responsible for dealing disasters (Darjeeling Municipality, n.d.). The West Bengal State Disaster Management Policy enjoins the local authorities, including municipalities, to function under the overall supervision and direction of the State Relief Commissioner or the District Magistrates in respect of disaster management (Government of West Bengal, n.d.). Hence, the District Magistrate's Office (DMO) and Darjeeling Municipality work in collaboration and seek to co-ordinate various activities relating to disaster management planning and implementation in the Darjeeling Municipal Area. However, recognising the increasing trend and severity of disasters in the municipal area, the Darjeeling Municipality has apparently formed a Disaster Management Committee consisting of a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, elected councillors, executive officers and other municipal officials.

This Committee acts as the nodal agency responsible for strengthening the organisational structures of disaster management and reorienting existing organisational and administrative structures (Darjeeling Municipality, n.d.). The task of the Committee is to "bring together in an integrated organisational structure the resources of the many agencies and individuals who can take appropriate and timely action" (Darjeeling Municipality, undated). Besides, ward-wise disaster management teams, comprising of ten members and headed by each ward councillor, are constituted to supervise disaster preparedness and capacity building in wards. Furthermore, the Darjeeling Municipality has also set up a duty control room to monitor emergency situations that may arise due to natural calamities.

Risk Reduction Measures In Darjeeling Municipality Area

Disaster risk reduction forms an important component of the present risk reduction measures. The Yokohama Strategy (1994), Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) (2005-2015), the Indian Disaster Management Act (2005), and Administrative Reforms Commission Report (2006) of the Government of India have increasingly established the significance of risk reduction. In tune with these strategies and statutes, the Darjeeling municipality has also adopted a series of measures to reduce risk in the areas under its jurisdiction. The measures can briefly be classified as follows:

- 1) *Building Bye-Laws* that provides a comprehensive regulatory framework for the construction of buildings within Darjeeling municipal area;
- 2) *Disaster Management Plan* aims at promoting a "culture of preparedness" through proactive disaster management measures of "planning, preparedness and prevention" for creating "disaster resilient Darjeeling with total risk reduction as the main monitoring

⁵ The cyclone claimed 27 lives, affecting 95,000 people in 425 villages and 84 wards in the Darjeeling District, with enormous loss of property and assets (Disaster Management Plan, Darjeeling, 2009).

parameter in all developmental investments and initiatives to ensure sustainable development.” (DM, undated).

3) *Draft Development Plan* is a useful instrument for integrated planning and balanced development, and provides a realistic approach towards integrating the disaster management concerns with development planning.

4) *Capacity Building Initiatives* Capacity building is an important aspect of disaster preparedness. In the context of the Darjeeling Municipal area, the Municipality, NGOs, *samaj*⁶, Civil Defence Department and other groups have taken measures to enhance and augment the community capacity for better disaster preparedness. These groups, however, do not function in isolation; rather they have sought to complement their efforts through cooperation and linkages. The Municipality, in cooperation with the Civil Defence Department and NGOs specialising in disaster management such as Red Cross and Anugyalaya and *samaj*, has initiated measures for capacity building that include sensitising the community about the disaster, training for rescue and relief and fostering community awareness through seminars and workshops.

The sensitization and training process starts at the ward level where the *samaj* unequivocally plays the most important role. As each ward is composed of few *samajs* (four to five), the representatives and community leaders of *samaj* are encouraged to participate in the workshop on disaster preparedness. The workshop includes emergency professional, civil defence personnel, representatives of NGOs (Anugalya and Red Cross), *samaj* and ward councillors. The participants (representatives and community leaders of *samaj*) are sensitised about the issues concerning disaster such as local environment and hazards, the vulnerable areas in each wards, the designated shelter points and the role that *samaj* could play in disaster mitigation and preparedness in their respective wards. The participants are encouraged to form a relief committee and a first-aid team in each ward; the relief committee is encouraged undertake the study of their village identifying vulnerable areas, unsafe buildings and slums (if any) and to built an emergency store room for storing first-aid materials and disaster combating equipments like spade, rope, search light, raincoat and tarpaulin.

The workshop is aimed at enabling the *samajs and Community Based Development Organizations* to incorporate the planning process specifically for disaster preparedness and also to induce a behavioural change in members of the community and their response to disaster, from being individualistic and reactionary to becoming proactive and responsible members of the *samaj*. Besides, the participants are also sensitised to the necessity and significance of effective communication, coordination and linkages of *samaj* with government, NGOs and other communities in disaster preparedness.

Besides, the Civil Defence Department holds different kinds of training related to disasters, including landslides and organizes training programme for Task Force, NGOs, school students and locals. The volunteers are provided with disaster- combating equipments for undertaking rescue works. There are 95 trained Civil Defence volunteers in Darjeeling Sadar whose service are utilised in the rescue of victims, clearing of roads, *jhoras* and other restorative works following disaster.

Discussion

⁶ Samaj is a self-organized grass-root level social institution that marks the social life in Darjeeling. The structure and other features of samaj are discussed in subsequent pages.

The above review of the risk reduction measures reveals that the Darjeeling Municipality possess the requisite regulatory mechanisms for risk reduction in the fragile social-ecological environment of Darjeeling. The risk reduction measures – particularly the building bye-laws, DDP and capacity building of the community – can stimulate the process of sound disaster preparedness. These measures, however, have proved ineffective, as the Darjeeling Municipal Area continues to be vulnerable to landslides of more intensity and greater damages. The problems that counteract risk reduction measures in the Darjeeling Municipal Area are manifold and operate through a variety of factors – land use pattern, environment management and governance, among others. Taken together, these factors challenge any risk reduction measures. Given the scope of this paper, the discussion will focus on various dynamics of participatory governance in disaster management system in Darjeeling.

Public Participation in Disaster Management: Darjeeling Scenario

The study found a manifest lack of public participation in decision making processes with regard to disaster management planning and implementation. This is evident from the fact that only a minority of residents is aware of the disaster management issues with only a handful participating in the sensitization, training programmes and other capacity building measures; the large majority are either unaware or have never participated in disaster management programmes. It was found that low levels of participation resulted from many factors. First, the respondents do not consider disaster management as a critical governance issue; disaster management, at best, is an ‘offhand’ affair which assumes significance only in the immediate backdrop of some disaster when individuals and community suffers loss and damages, and is quickly forgotten as soon as ‘normalcy’ is restored. The respondent quoted below reflects this perception of disaster management, which was generally shared by other respondents as well:

I don't know much about disaster management, though I have heard of disasters like Tsunami and Aila. Frankly, for me, there are other more pressing issues that need attention, for example the water crisis which affects almost every one. I don't think disaster management is so critical to our well being.

Another respondent, associated with a local NGO, articulated the lack of concern for disaster management among the residents:

The people are not much concerned about disaster management even when Darjeeling is such a hazard prone zone. We do not have much understanding about disaster management here and it is only when disaster strikes that people talk of it, but it is soon forgotten until the next disaster...The people are too engrossed in other issues to care for something like disaster preparedness. In fact, when people do not care for their immediate surroundings, then expecting them to participate in disaster management would be a little far fetched.

This respondent also mentioned social fragmentation, disintegration of societal values and alienation from decision making processes as resulting in an uncaring attitude towards disaster management.

However, there appears to be a relationship between the degree to which communities accept disaster management planning and the degree to which they experience disasters: the greater the exposure to disasters, the greater the interest in disaster management (Drabek, 1986). The interest in disaster management was found to be greater among those affected by the disaster events and the recent cyclone 'Aila' than those who have not had any disaster experience or suffered any loss. The majority of the latter consider problems like water crisis, sanitation, unemployment, corruption, and regional politics as more important concerns than disaster preparedness. The Coordinator of Anugyalaya, which is actively engaged in CBDP described this difference in the outlook:

The individuals who have undergone personal trauma and stress are more willing to participate in disaster management activities. In fact, we found that in the areas affected by Aila, people are very enthusiastic about disaster preparedness measures and actively participate in the capacity building programmes that we hold. It seems disaster has changed their outlook towards disaster management.

Second, the public institutions concerned with disaster management themselves lack the will to encourage the participation of citizens in disaster planning and implementation. The NGO respondents complained about the lack of citizens' participation in the overall planning process, including disaster management, owing to overtly bureaucratic functioning of the public officials where the disaster management is still a technocrat's domain; and, hence it has been conducted for, rather than with, the community (Laughy, 1991 in Pearce, 2003). The participation, therefore, is limited only to the acceptance of outcomes of various disaster management plans, rather than extending across the entire decision making process. Even though the Darjeeling District Crisis Management Committee holds periodic meetings involving various stakeholders to discuss and design disaster management strategies, it was found that not all stakeholders participate. In fact, the respondents except for a few community representatives and NGOs, expressed their lack of awareness of such meetings, and have neither participated in any programme on disaster preparedness or been consulted or engaged in disaster management planning. Further, the participant (community representatives and NGO) respondents view these meetings as a 'ritualistic function' – 'to show that government is concerned about the people' – where their concerns and needs are hardly taken into consideration.

While the training programmes of Civil Defence were considered as effective and useful in disaster preparedness, the participants believe that the government's disaster preparedness programmes have too few disaster management professionals, and inadequate guidelines and materials. The public officials, for their part, blame the elected representatives and residents, who they say do not show much concern about training and disaster preparedness programmes even when invited. The senior Civil Defence official described this lack of concern for disaster management programmes thus:

They (people) believe it is only our (government's) responsibility to remain prepared for any disaster events as if they do not have any responsibility towards their community... We hold training, at least, once every year and encourage participation of the people, especially the youths. However, very few turn up and those who turn up go missing when we invite them next time. Even the representatives of the people are indifferent to our training programmes and very few participate.

This lack of participation has led to an increasing sense of alienation and frustration among the community leaders and NGOs who feel that the community is being excluded from decision-making processes in disaster management planning. Besides, the community representatives attending the training programme and volunteers of the Civil Defence are basically drawn from the male members of the community which restricts the participation of the women and the inclusion of gender concerns in disaster management. In fact, only two women respondents, who were community representatives in the training programme, confirmed their participation in disaster preparedness programmes.

Third, participation is restrained by the fact that disaster management is still to emerge as an integral part of governance within public institutions in Darjeeling Municipal Area. At the district level, it is the concern of the Relief and Civil Defence Department with other line departments playing supportive role, while at the Municipality level, the Engineering Department shares a major part of the responsibility; disaster management is yet to have a separate and distinct identity of its own. In other words, disaster management suffers from something like an 'identity crisis'. Besides, the low level of participation is also the result of the low priority accorded to disaster management in development policies. DDP, though it contains the CBDP Programme in its Environmental Management sub-component, is yet to become operative, and hence it is difficult to determine the level of response and participation that it will generate. However, NGO respondents generally felt that government was not doing enough for disaster management; the government's effort to bring disaster preparedness measures closer to the people, they believe, could generate support from the residents. Few respondents, including public officials, believe that the Municipality does not have sufficient funds for disaster management; the State Government is viewed as being too 'avaricious' on this front not only in respect of disaster management but also in other domains of policy implementation. The account of one respondent, an ex-councillor himself, is a typical version of this:

The authorities, both local and state government, are indifferent to disaster management. Disaster management is a capital intensive activity requiring huge investment for its sustainability. But our Municipality is too 'poor' to take up such high cost activity...Of course, the Municipality sends its fund proposal to the State (government) but the latter hardly moves. It is always like that.

Yet another respondent, a senior NGO and social worker, considers that the State government is ignorant of the needs of the Darjeeling Hills, even with respect to disaster management planning:

The government lacks knowledge about our needs. Even the planning for disaster preparedness is done by those who does not have an iota of knowledge about Darjeeling...I remember that government sent boats during 1968 landslides in Darjeeling. Boats! That is the level of awareness that government has regarding the disaster relief needs of the people here. They simply draw plans from somewhere and thrust it upon us.

This belief was shared by the public official respondents as well as those who believe that major decisions concerning disaster management are the sole prerogative of the State government, with no involvement of the local authorities.

Samaj

Another significant dimension of participation that emerged during the course of study is the role of community based organisations, particularly *samaj* in the disaster preparedness measures. The *samaj* is a self-organized grass-root level social institution (Pradhan, 2008) with a participatory basis where members discuss, debate and try to arrive at certain solution on various matters. The membership of a *samaj* is open to any individual on the payment of a nominal membership and annual fees. However, it is generally the people living in an area who are its members and the functionaries appointed to manage the affairs of *samaj* are chosen from amongst the members. As a convention, it is generally the elder members who are appointed to the post of president, vice-president, general-secretary and treasurer. The role and geographic area covered by the *samaj* vary from one place to another; some *samaj* may provide assistance in birth and death issues while others may even organize scholarships for meritorious students; the area covered by a *samaj* can vary from one village to a cluster of villages. (Pradhan, 2008) The *samaj* holds annual meeting where the annual expenditure statement and the activities of the *samaj* is presented, along with future proposals. The members can raise issues that are of common interest or which have collective connotation. Generally, the functions of the *samaj* extend from assistance in social ceremonies such as birth and death to various other social welfare activities like sanitation, tree plantation, water supply and others. The *samaj* also acts as a conflict resolution forum among the members and seeks to amicably settle the issues brought to its notice. In the context of disaster management, the *samaj* acts as relief provider, a forum for sensitising people on disaster preparedness; and, training the locals on disaster rescue activities through the assistance of Civil Defence and NGOs. The study found that *samaj* acts as a catalyst in promoting disaster preparedness; its role in the rescue and recovery activities is one of its most noteworthy contributions in disaster management which has been discussed below.

The *samaj* in collaboration with Civil Defence is involved in providing training to the local people and is one of the first to respond when disasters occur. Ironically, most of the *samaj* lacks the capacity – funds, emergency professionals, disaster combating equipments and materials, and contingency plans – to proactively engage itself in the disaster preparedness on a long term basis. Further, the absence of support from government undoubtedly inhibits the *samaj*'s role in disaster management. Respondents from among the community representatives believe that while the training programmes are useful and effective for better disaster preparedness, they are not able to follow it up regularly in their areas due to lack of funds. The respondent, who regularly participates in disaster preparedness programmes, voiced his concern

I represent my *samaj* in these programmes and get to know what needs to be done for better disaster preparedness; however, we do not have specific provisions for disaster management in our *samaj* like disaster fund and organising them is not an easy task as other activities take bulk of our finance...We send a list of items (to the Relief Department) for procuring disaster combating equipments and also requested for arranging some funds to set up store room for this equipments but so far we have not heard or received any assistance from them.

The lack of sustained support from government makes it hard for *samaj* to put disaster preparedness measures into action, while it deprives the government of employing the constructive power of *samaj* in disaster management.

Conclusion

The prevailing disaster management system suggests that the Darjeeling municipality is still to develop a sound disaster mitigation and response system. Despite the fact that a number of disaster mitigation and preparedness measures exists – building bye-laws, disaster management plans, capacity building – these has not bettered the prospects of Darjeeling municipal area in terms of sound disaster management system. More importantly, there is also a manifest linkage between governance and disaster management. In the context of Darjeeling municipal area, the lack of participation in the disaster management system is a two way process: the apathy of the government to promote disaster management as a critical governance issue has resulted in indifferent public response to disaster management programmes as a result of which the government, including Darjeeling municipality, lacks the institutional capacity to build requisite disaster management mechanisms. However, the communities through organisations like *samaj* have responded to disasters, besides adopting disaster mitigation measures like capacity building and afforestations. The presence of *samaj*, as the grassroots level organisation, in the social life has made it an integral part of disaster management system in Darjeeling municipal area.

However, the lack of resources to build and enhance disaster preparedness has inhibited the capacity of *samaj* to address the concerns of disaster management. Ironically, no support is forthcoming for *samaj* from the government. The lack of participation, however, is not manifested in the absence or lack of participation in the rescue, relief and rehabilitation process following the cyclone Aila. A plethora of organisations – governmental, non-governmental organisations, *samaj* and other community based organisations – formed a part of the response team to rescue the affected people, provide relief and also rehabilitate them. These organisations, however, lack the coordination to synchronise and channel their resources which inhibits the effectiveness of rescue operations. Despite the fact that government is primarily responsible for the rehabilitation of the affected people, the effort of the government in this regard is basically a short- term one, with no plan to properly rehabilitate the affected people. As a result, the people in certain wards/areas have increasingly turned towards the *samaj* which has, indeed, taken the task of rebuilding lives by ensuring that the affected people are settled in safe habitation areas.

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