

**DISASTER AND ANTHROPOLOGY: AN OVERVIEW ON
THE SHIFTS OF THEORIZING DISASTER IN
INTERDISCIPLINARY SPECTRUM**

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ABSTRACT

Anthropology has had a long tradition to address disaster. Though, not in the label of disaster anthropology, initiated its passage of studying the adaptive strategies of the people in stressful and hazardous environment in 1950s, the discipline has come across multiple shifts in theoretical frames within. Contemporary research trends in anthropology claim an interdisciplinary attention to understand disaster as a process in the matrix of rapid and varied global change. At this juncture, the present authors have tried to focus on the shifts of anthropological approaches to disaster since its gestation in one hand, and, to indicate the contemporary trends of disaster research within the discipline of anthropology to support its claim of collaborative disaster researches on the other.

Keywords: Anthropology, Disaster, Theory, Interdisciplinarity

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Introduction

In the article *Anthropological Research on Hazards and Disasters*, Anthony Oliver-Smith stated that “Recent perspectives in anthropological research define a disaster as a process/event involving the combination of a potentially destructive agent(s) from the natural and/or technological environment and a population in a socially and technologically produced condition of vulnerability” (Oliver-Smith, 1996, p.303). That indicates a view to understand disaster as a process that combines the source agent(s) in one hand and human population with its social and technological vulnerabilities on the other (Bankoff, 2007).

Addressing disaster in terms of the source agent is a focus on the natural hazards (like- earthquakes, tornados, famine and floods) and its impact to unfold the process associated with the target agent, is reflected in the disciplinary understandings of Geography and other geophysical sciences, like- Geology, Volcanology, Hydrology and Geomorphology (Mercer, Kelman, Lloyd and Pearson, 2008; Perry, 2007). Contrastingly, voluminous sociological and anthropological researches on the adaptive strategies of the societies in stressful and hazardous environments reflect that, the source of hazard(s) is not necessarily present in the natural environment; rather they are controlled by the social, economic and political forces to a given context (Vayda and McKay, 1975; Torry, 1979). Quarantelli (2005) argued that the study on disasters does not mean the exclusive study of hazard; rather contemporary disciplinary understanding of disaster shows that the meaning of disaster is socially constructed and is clearly a social issue as opposed to the term, ‘hazard’, a natural agency like- flood, famine and earthquake.

Defining Disaster: The Controversies and Consensus

The emergence of new form of hazard and rapidly changing human-environmental relations and conditions of the globe, leads multiple meanings of disaster to the researchers of the concerned disciplines and offers the definitional debate over the issue (Oliver-Smith, 1996; Mustafa, 2005). Any government organization develops ‘mandated’ definitions of disaster to indicate and determine the boundaries of emergency management and response (Perry, 2007; Buckle, 2005); the emergency managers hold a specific view on what constitutes a disaster (Britton, 1986), whereas the social scientists perceive disaster as a situation or an event that offers a temporary or

permanent threat to the social order or to a given normative social system (Wallace, 1956; Fritz, 1961; Stallings, 1998). A number of definitions then should be taken into account to obtain the meaning of disaster with the consideration of the 'contextuality' of definitions (Perry, 2007).

The specific purpose, contexts and interests of the definer or researcher generates a range of definitions of disaster in disciplinary terms. David Alexander (2005) identified a class of disciplines (Geography, Anthropology, Sociology, Developmental Studies, Health Sciences, Geo-Physical Sciences and Social Psychology) that never addressed the definition of disaster before studying it. So, the empirical experiences and the context(s) to approach such a social issue like disaster, acts as the ground to define it. The empirical experiences of disaster as a social phenomenon, Britton (2005) opined, should be understood as a unique identity compared to, the existing notion of disaster.

As per as the 'empericality' and 'contextuality' of disaster is concerned in scientific practices and explanations of the phenomenon, like-disaster, the scholars show a high degree of definitional debate over the issue; that reflects the lack of consensus to a universally accepted definition of disaster (Cutter, 2005). Trying for consensus of the definition of disaster then, may not worth thinking. Rather, Jigyasu (2005) argued that, the researcher should clarify and address their view to the area of thinking (either on 'disaster research' or 'disaster management') that may help to the new comer in disaster study to get a clear view of the disaster research, which alternatively means research on disaster, research in disaster or research on disaster management.

The definitional debate of the term, 'disaster' necessitates the clarification in different perspectives. Cutter (2005) argued that the researchers use a number of 'terms' (like- hazards, risks, disasters, and vulnerability) to indicate, reflect and explain the nature and source of the agent(s) (man-made or natural), their threat and impact to denote human inability for facing the 'unexpected'. She further clarified each of the terms to differentiate the degree of application of the terms in contexts. The ontological debate on disaster is a continuous episode that greets all the alternative usage of the term (Perry, 2007).

Anthropological Intervention to Disaster Studies: The Shifts and Turns

Uniqueness of anthropology than other social science disciplines interested in disaster studies is that- it seeks to explore disaster in totality, includes environmental, biological and socio-cultural planes together to understand the process of disaster (Hoffman, 2010). Disaster is located at the interface of culture, society and environment that offers anthropology to account the phenomena as a major research area (Reddy, 2011). Disasters as research area promote a real challenge for anthropology, as Fjord and Manderson (2009) argued, “Few research topics provide more daunting challenges than disaster studies because of the magnitude of what the discipline encompasses: the diversity of natural and human-made hazards, the spectrum of social and physical geographies, the ethnohistorical, sociopolitical, and economic factors that locate specific circumstances in larger global climatic, geophysical and social processes” (Fjord and Manderson, 2009, p. 64). The account of disaster studies are so vast and varied (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 2002), it is very difficult to systematically arrange the approaches in a chronological paradigm. An attempt has been made by us to make a brief outline of the major theoretical turns and shifts of disaster studies in anthropology under the following themes.

Theorizing Disaster as an Isolated Event

Anthropological studies on disasters were initiated in almost 1950s (Drabek, 1986). The nature of anthropological inquiry of disaster then was atheoretical and totally uninvolved to the definitional issue, rather the prime focus on the responses of the ‘traditional’ communities to the specific events (Oliver-Smith, 1999). Anthropology during 1940s and 1950s contributed a very little to the study of disasters as a process and obtained the meaning of disaster as something that disrupts human ‘normal’ living (Anderskov, 2010).

The adaptive strategies of the societies in stressful and hazardous environments were taken to account in a structural-functional and particularistic ideology to indicate the disruption disaster represents to a normal daily life (Torry, 1979; Anderskov, 2010). The era is known as ‘Anthropology of Suffering’ (Davis, 1992). The studies on adaptive strategies lead the question of adaptation to hazard and disasters is paralleled by a similar concern about the long term sustainability of resource(s) use along with present levels of environmental degradation and pollution (Oliver-smith, 1999). However, the studies on adaptive strategies guided a new pathway to anthropological research regarding disaster. The new trend showed that any disaster involves loss of property and means of livelihood, calls for a change in the modes of subsistence

and the social organization that regulates them (Firth, 1959). The era reflects an idea that disaster as a social phenomenon disrupts and constitutes cultural meaning(s) to a given cultural milieu.

Disaster as a Factor of Social Change

The trend of viewing disaster as a factor of social change emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. In this era, disasters have been sensed as a catalyst factor for social change (Anderskov, 2010). Anthony Oliver-Smith (1996) commented that, “Disasters can also be important factors in social and cultural change. In the sense that a disaster damages or destroys a society’s ability to provide, however differentially, for the needs of its members, new adjustments or arrangements may have to be formulated for it to continue functioning. Therefore, disaster research inevitably addresses the issue, or at least the potential, of change” (Oliver-Smith, 1996, p. 312). A good number of anthropological studies in this phase were conducted with a deep attention to long term social change as major implication of disaster (Oliver-Smith, 1996; Minnis, 1985).

Disaster and Political-Economy

At the very beginning of 1980s, disaster studies in anthropology shifted its new theoretical turn to the study of political-economic perspectives of disaster (Oliver-Smith, 2002). The ideologies of structural Marxism and political economy lead the pathway of introducing the new pathway to the disaster research (Anderskov, 2010). Criticizing the disaster researches on 1960s and 1970s, disaster anthropologists of this era claimed a detailed theoretical scrutiny of how societies have been evolved with the rise of capitalism and/or modern state structures (Anderskov, 2010; Ortner, 1984). Oliver-Smith (1996) mentioned in this context- “Since the early 1980s, many anthropological and cultural geographers, following the growth of both cultural ecological and political economic perspectives in those disciplines, began to reconsider disasters less as the result of geo-physical extremes such as storms, earthquakes, avalanches, droughts, etc and more as functions of an ongoing social order, of this order’s structure of human environmental

relations, and of larger framework of historical and structural processes, such as colonialism and underdevelopment, that have shaped these phenomena” (Oliver-Smith, 1996, p.314). The phase of disaster research invited the anthropologists from third-world to rethink about disasters from political-economic perspectives, based on the correlations between disaster proneness, chronic malnutrition, low income and famine potential, that establishes disaster as embedded in its social root than natural magnitude (Hewitt, 1983; Oliver-Smith, 2002; Anderskov, 2010).

Politics, Power and Disaster

Power as a central theme to disaster studies in anthropology emerged in the mid of 1980s (Oliver-Smith, 2002). The era constituted the notion that disaster is a context that helps to understand the power relation and arrangements within a social order (Oliver-Smith, 1996). Two related themes were mainly considered in this regard- (a) disaster as opportunity/cause for political socialization and mobilization, and (b) disaster caused alterations with the state (Oliver-Smith, 1996; Johnston and Schulte, 1992). Disaster can transform political consciousness, dissolve power arrangements, creates political solidarity, activism, new agendas and may develop new power relations (Johnston and Schulte, 1992; Oliver-Smith, 1992). Hewitt (1983) labelling the traditional disaster researches as the ‘dominant view’ (from the perspectives of the policy makers and government functioning), criticized them to focus too much on the nature and cutting off the everyday life experiences and ordinary human activity from disaster issues; suggested to take account on the human ‘lived’ experiences and senses to understand a disaster. The transformation of cultural meaning(s) due to disaster as a central meaning shifted the focus of contemporary anthropological research to the study of the crisis and everyday life (Winchester, 1981). Individual’s social position and response are taken into account as the unit of study of disasters like wars and famine (Moser, 1989).

Conclusion: The Possibilities of Interdisciplinary Concern

The appeal to interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary attempts of disaster studies find its logic that no one discipline can provide all the answers, solutions or what we think relevant to understand a disaster in totality (Quarantelli, 2005). Considering the complexities of the disaster in the face of

rapid globalization and industrialization, integration of different disciplinary interpretation of disasters should be taken into account (Reddy, 2011).

Following Hewitt's notion of disaster research, Blaikie et.al (1994) developed interdisciplinary research approach in anthropology to study disaster. Disasters are now considered as socially constructed phenomena and are clearly found in its social, economic and political realm (Anderskov, 2004; O'Keefe, Westgate and Wisner, 1976). The current research trends in anthropology focuses on the concept of vulnerability in terms of the social, economic and political conditions which differently affects individuals and groups, as well as the overall capacity of the community to absorb shock and to recover (O'Keefe, Westgate and Wisner, 1976). The 'shock' related to a disaster and its system of recovery, needs an interdisciplinary attention. There have been many research efforts of using social psychological theories to unify and expand current conceptions of access in ethnographic research-the process by which researchers gather data via interpersonal relationships with participants/informants (Harrington, 2003). A number of researchers have begun to recognize the increasing importance of broader anthropological and social psychological issues in the study of humans in extreme environments (Johnson and Finney, 1986; Harrison and Connors, 1984; Pierce 1985). In addition, the social-psychological issues of reactions (like- fear, anxiety, anger, impatience, irritability, grief, shame, guilt, stress, trauma, etc.) to disasters and mechanisms of resilience may be an effective means for contemporary anthropological researches, theory building and policy making on well-being (Greene, 2003; Johnson and Finney, 1986).

Disasters in the contemporary fast and changing world are more complex and severe (Cutter, 2005). As a social phenomenon, disaster calls for a serious, systematic and theoretical social science perspectives (Reddy, 2011). Though, sociology has contributed systematic and extensive study on disasters for last five decades, anthropology is not yet rich in this area of research, especially in theoretical issues (Oliver-Smith, 2002; Quarantelli, 2005). But, the scholars from different subfields of anthropology are gaining their interests in disaster researches at present (Hoffman, 2010; Reddy, 2011). Hoffman (2010) mentioned that medical anthropology reflects the researches on the health impact of disasters, political anthropology on political ecology issues, like- hegemony, neoliberalism and environmental advocacy, environmental anthropology on disaster impacts on the communities depended upon natural resources and psychological

anthropology on victim liminality and Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). The disaster issues in medical, political, environmental and psychological anthropology shows a high degree of interdisciplinary trends of research, as Reddy (2011) rightly mentioned that- anthropology can immensely contribute to disaster discourse due to its multidimensionality and methodological rigor.

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