

Human Being and Natural Disaster

POINTS TO DEVELOP

Human beings have always been victims of natural disasters.

Fear of disasters has not made humans more Cautious or careful in conserving environment.

To an extent, science has helped humans in facing up to natural disasters- prediction is possible in some cases, so timely evacuation saves human lives.

Human beings are, however, still vulnerable.

Natural disasters bring out the best and the Worst in human beings.

Only partial success in facing up to and coping with natural disasters.

Since ancient time, human beings have been victims of natural disasters of different kind upon the face of the earth. Be it an earthquake, flood, a cyclone or a volcanic eruption, humans have always held a fear of any natural catastrophe. The primary reason for such fear IS not hard to guess-it has been human inability to cope with natural disasters. Today, we are scientifically and technologically superior to our ancestors. Advancements in science have indeed helped us predict many disasters and opened up ways to control some of them. However, the damage inflicted by natural disasters is huge even today. Why is it so? Are natural disasters in the modern era a result of natural forces alone?

It is ironical that while we dread such disasters for the suffering, they inflict upon us, we play a part in causing them to take place. Reckless use of technological capability has been responsible for much of environmental degradation and its unfavorable effects. There is also the use of natural resources without an effort to sustain a balance in our ecological system. For instance, impounding of water in reservoirs behind dams in tectonically unstable areas induces as well as increases the danger of earthquakes, indiscriminate falling of trees and the thinning forest cover are factors that contribute to floods. Mining on a large scale induces landslides. It appears that we human beings have been unable to limit our actions responsible for ecological degradation and natural disasters in spite of knowing the extent to which they can cause damage.

To a certain extent, science has helped humans to cope with natural disasters by limiting the amount of damage caused. Natural disasters result not only in loss of material wealth but also cause extreme physical and mental suffering to the

victims. Such disasters affect not just a few persons; the damage is usually on a large scale, leaving behind thousands of suffering people. Owing to technological and scientific development, natural disasters can be predicted to a great extent nowadays. A chain of seismographs, for instance, can generate data that provides early warnings. Equipment is also available for identifying flood-prone areas and evacuating these areas before the floods. So can the eruption of a volcano or the coming of a cyclone be detected and the population evacuated from the danger areas before the disaster strikes. It is true that installing advanced equipment to detect such disasters is an expensive affair. Many of the poor nations, preoccupied with the problem of providing the basic necessities of life to their populations, can neither give adequate attention to the problem of predicting disasters nor afford the necessary equipment. But an encouraging sign in this context is the recent advancements in weather technology systems. These allow detection of disasters across the globe from any place on the earth. The development in communication technology has also been such that information can be immediately imparted to the victim nation or nations which can then begin evacuation work at the earliest. But it is surprising that even a scientifically and technologically advanced country like Japan has been unable to cope with major earthquakes in recent years. So how and where do humans almost inevitably fail?

Generally speaking, what is usually noticeable is human being's delayed reaction to any natural disaster. A lot of time is lost between first receiving the news of a potential disaster and getting the areas to be affected cleared of people. Lack of funds is a serious problem in ensuring the availability of the right kind of technology to cope with such disasters. Sometimes the level of technology available may be such as to help minimize damage but constraint in funds prevents its utilization. Earthquake-proof houses can be built to limit the damage inflicted by earthquakes but such houses are rarely built. Sheer human carelessness is an unexplainable factor. In spite of adequate warning, a nonchalant attitude on the part of the government may hamper prevention and relief activities. Administrative lapses owing to indifference play a prominent role in aggravating the problem. Even the people are sometimes quite unwilling to vacate the areas to be affected, and this is not always due to lack of education. People are attached to their homes, the land or the village, town or city or they own fertile lands in the area and fear unemployment impoverishing them. It is also observed that some people are ready to incur material loss by floods and earthquakes in desire of the compensation that would be awarded to them by the government. People are also not always adequately warned and rightly informed about the impending catastrophe. While dwelling on natural disasters and human

ability to cope with them, it is significant to point out that the struggle to cope with such a disaster brings out the best and the worst in humans.

International cooperation is high when it comes to communicating disaster-related information to the nation that is to be affected. Even after the disaster strikes and rehabilitation is on, there is no dearth of offers from foreign countries to help clear the affected site and resettle the people. Countries express willingness to donate finances to help the affected people. Within the affected nation also, cooperation is high between the various units engaged in relief and aid activities. The feelings of the masses are stirred and they are willing to assist in help and support to the afflicted. A nation comes together in the wake of such disasters. Disasters also help to set in motion sincere research and study of the factors that caused the disaster and of better ways to predict and prevent such disasters in the future.

At the same time, a natural disaster exposes the various human frailties and faults that led to the disaster in the first place. All kinds of unpleasant details come to the fore—for instance, how lack of planning and corruption on the part of the administration failed to provide safety and limit damage as evident in cyclone-hit Orissa recently. Even after the disaster has struck, efforts to provide short-term as well as long-term relief to the victims are usually hampered by interference from vested interests within and outside the administrative set-up. Where the victims are concerned, in the struggle for survival—as one may call it—those who have been deeply afflicted and require urgent relief may be ignored by the assisting people. Natural disasters also do not come alone; one such disaster may lead to many other problems caused by poor sanitation, health and rehabilitation work.

Natural disasters are not really under our control. But if we discipline our actions and give more attention to how they affect our environment, many disasters would not occur. Or at least the factors causing them would not be aggravated. Once a natural disaster occurs, many shortcomings on the part of human beings increase the damage and multiply the sufferings caused. Technological means alone are not enough to limit the damage caused by disasters; what is necessary is prompt action to deliver relief as effectively as possible at the earliest.

Humans have certainly learnt over the ages how to face natural disasters, even cope with them to an extent. But even now the fury of nature can reduce the scientifically advanced and technologically equipped human being to a practical non-entity.