



Full Length Research Article

**AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FLOOD
IN A RURAL SETTING OF WEST BENGAL, INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

The leading objective of the present study is to represent the meaningful and subjective insights of the lived experiences of flood among the residents of a rural setting of Ghatal (West Midnapore), West Bengal. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study seeks to explore the insider's perspectives of the flood that are a very habitual event at Ghatal. Seven participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview method, resulted a detailed and rich data about the subjective perception of the participants about flood are transcribed verbatim and interpreted through three broad themes- (a) sensing flood from positive and negative frames, (b) living the flood and its consequences, and (c) the issues of relief and local politics. The mentioned themes are solely grounded on the participants' logical understanding of the flood and their livelihood that may be addressed for better policies and action on these issues.

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INTRODUCTION

Flood is the most common natural disaster in the world that has the positive and negative consequences in context to the economic, environmental, social, and health perspectives (Chomsri and Sherer, 2013; Jonkman and Kelman, 2005). As a natural disaster, flood challenges the river communities of the world though many of them are protected by flood control measures (Liao, 2012). The degree of damage to societies in flood disasters is depended upon the physical location, topographic nature of the place, and the nature of the built environment (Du, Gerald, Clark and Hou, 2010). Despite the fact that flood or any kinds of natural disasters have had a 'natural' magnitude, but, it is human living that has to face the effects of the natural hazards. The impacts of a natural hazard affect differently on human individuals that make up the subjective perceptions, actions, and interpretations of the disaster reality (O'Keefe, Westgate and Wisner, 1976). Our point of departure in context to the present research is people's perception and suffering due to the flood at Ghatal. Ghatal is a severely flood prone zone of the state of West Bengal that

meets flood once in every calendar year, especially during monsoon- from the month of June to September (Mandal Sahoo and Sivaramakrishnan, 2014). Dolui and Ghosh (2013) has pointed out that the critical drainage pattern of the river Silabati and the climatic fluctuations of the monsoon season make Ghatal flooded with unexpected disastrous knocks and long term water contaminations over the area. They further opined that the physiographic pattern of Ghatal is too critical that except a few occasion, the place is habituated to be flooded. The people of the local villages of Ghatal faces the worst during flood as they became almost home arrested by a heavy amount of water for several days. The present study seeks to understand the senses, meanings, perceptions and sufferings of the local people through the lived experiences of the participants for a deeper understanding of the processes the people survive with flood in the area under study.

Objectives of the Research

The study includes three-fold research objectives that are as follows-

1. How the people understand and sense the flood?
2. How people live with flooding and orient them with the process of flooding?

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3. How the issues of relief and local politics are perceived by the participants?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Area, Sampling and Data Collection

The study was conducted in a flood prone village of Ghatal block. Seven participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview method. The selection of the participants was done by nested sampling method.

Data Transcription

The extensively rich data were transcribed verbatim to include insider's perspective.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA).

The Findings

The orientations of flood have many layers among the participants. The respondents have their own subjective positions and logical ways to understand the flood as a phenomenon. The findings of the research for convenience of representation have been classified into three thematic subheads- (a) sensing flood from positive and negative frames, (b) living the flood and its consequences, and (c) the issues of relief and local politics. The detailed accounts on the themes are as follows-

(a) Sensing Flood from Positive and Negative Frames

The meanings of flood are perceived differently by the participants under study. Positive and negative opinions of flood are evident in the data. Mr. S. Pramanik, a 42 years old farmer opined that- *flood has a positive impact in cultivation...the land became fertile after the flood...we are farmers...a huge cost to rent a pump for irrigation sometimes became impossible to us...we are habituated to flood...flood is our destiny...we live everyday by preparing ourselves for flood.* Mr. L. Santra, a 39 years old mason was in view that- *I have three boats of my own that helps me and my family member to maintain communication during flood...I have no fixed income as such...the flooded condition benefits me to earn money by capitalizing my boats during flood.* Mr. T. Bakshi, a 43 years old school teacher was of opinion that- *I prefer flood... I am a teacher of a Primary School...the area is too low...a few drops of rain made the area very muddy...I feel very irritated to go to school then...flood is much better...at least...I can reach to the school directly by the boat.*

Contrastingly Mrs. K. Pramanik, a 33 years old housewife perceives flood very negatively. She views- *I have two children who suffers a lot with their schooling during flood...a long term (sometimes 5-6 months) water stagnancy makes them to be very irregular in schools and private tuitions...our two rooms became our world for several months...we have to collect drinking water from a long distant neighbour's house*

regularly...we became captive during flood. Dr. N. Jana, a 51 years old medical practitioner opined- *flood comes with horrible experiences in my professional life almost every calendar year in this place...a number of water borne diseases spread out during flood...It became very difficult to attain too many patients a day...in night the situation became very critical...I have to attend the patient's call at night in the ground of humanity...but there are great risks at night in the flooded areas.* Flood in the area under study is a phenomenon with multiple interpretations of expectations and sufferings. The participants show a great degree of variations in understanding flood in their everyday and substantive living over the area. It has both positive and negative appearances among the participants through which they shape their perception and attaches meaning towards flooded situations.

(b) Living the Flood and its Consequences

During the flood, situation became very dreadful for the villagers. Major inconveniences disrupt the living in its 'normal' form. One of the most important difficulties is the electricity that remains off during flood for long time in the village, sometimes the duration last for three to four months. Mr. J. Santra, a 46 years old farmer was of opinion that- *due to absence of electricity we suffer a lot...in the last year an old man was going to the town by a 'dingi' (a Special kind of boat made up of wood) of his own...at night the situation was jet black as there was no light and there was full of water everywhere...even the light posts and the electric connections were invisible due to water...the old man got shocked from a faulty electric connections and died immediately...frankly speaking thinking the situation we really scared to go to anywhere at night during flood.* Long term absence of electricity makes the electronic communication and household activities in deep trouble. Mrs. L. Santra, 38 years old housewife opined that- *at night maintaining household activities became tough...we have to share three oil lamps for the different purposes...at the time of immediate danger we cannot even make a call for help as there is no charge in mobile phones...we have to go to the town for mobile phone charging...and to store the battery for immediate use we have to switch off the phones in the maximum time in a day...switching off the phone for a long time sometimes make my relatives worry about us at the flood situation.*

Another important inconvenience occurs with the drinking water. As the maximum water taps on the road remains under the water, the villagers has to depend on the tube well that is been owned by a few villagers. The rest of the villagers have to go to a long to collect drinking water by their personal boats. Mrs. K. Pramanik told that- *we have to go a long to a neighbour's house for drinking water...we have to wait there for a long time as many villagers are there before us to collect the drinking water.* Mr. J. Santra has opined that- *we have no tube well of our own...we have to collect drinking water from our neighbour's house...at the very early morning we have to go to collect water for an early return.* Dr. N. Jana was in view that- *we have to meet a great crisis of drinking water at flood situations...people have to collect water from long distances...the improper way to protect and store the drinking water makes people ill with water borne diseases.*

Health became a major concern to the flood situations. Severely ill patients and pregnant women suffer a lot during flood. Mrs. L. Santra experienced a case with her neighbour who was a pregnant lady- *in five years back Parvati (the pregnant lady) felt pain at night...around 11 p.m...me, Parvati, her husband and her father-in-law were in the boat to the way to town hospital. Parvati was almost senseless...the situations became very dreadful...we have reached to another village and by the help of other women and a local nurse of the same village made the delivery of the child successful...you can imagine what were the risks then??*. Mr. S. Pramanik has experienced a dangerous situation with his son during 2007 flood. He told that- *my son was infected by cholera...at a night he was almost senseless due to multiple times loose motion and vomiting...a local doctor put him saline and referred immediately to the town hospital...we felt anxious about how to move my child in a boat in such a dangerous situations...my neighbours helped me a lot at that night...we three along with my son in a boat started our journey to the hospital...water level was rising and the water current was very strong...it was raining heavily and constantly...my son started to vomiting again...for a single second... I felt that I have lost my son...after an hour we reached to the hospital...my son has almost lost his sensation...after a few hours my son got back his senses...the doctors of the hospitals was too good to treat my son...It's God's blessing that we were enabled to getting back my son in the home*. Flood inconveniences are very critical to the village under study. The villagers have to face a great crisis to meet their livelihood during flood.

(c) The Issues of Relief and Local Politics

The issues of relief from any Govt. and non- Govt. agencies in the setting is very poor during flood. The participants are of opinion that they are neglected by the Govt. and non-Govt. agencies in flood situations. Mr. L. Santra told that- *nobody cares for us at flood situations...many surveys have been done in the area...but we faces the same critical conditions during flood...there are no space to pass the stagnant water due to the poor drainage and sewage system...sometimes the municipality offers some dry food for first two or three days of a flood...but is that enough???*

The fundamental problem due to flood in the area is the long term water stagnancy that disrupts the life and living of the local people. Communication became very tough due to overflow of water. All the villagers do not have their personal boats. For communication, the villagers either have to depend on the neighbour's boat or have to wait for other private boats that are been used for business not for relief. Mr. S. Pramanik was of opinion that- *the municipality offers boat for first few days of a flood for relief...but...there are no such relief for long term flood over the area...communication became impossible to us...the children do not attain school regularly...if they reach to the school anyway... but not in time*.

There are no health camps or mobile health services at the time of flood. The villagers have to depend on the town hospitals or to the local doctors. The municipality sometimes distribute some relief aids like-dry food, large plastic covers, bleaching powder etc. but these aids hardly reach to them who really need this. Mr. J. Santra opined that- *there are some*

political brokers in our village who negotiates between us and the municipality...actually they decide who needs aid at flood situations...unfortunately... their near and dear ones receive the relief aids...and those who need the relief aid really do not get anything.

Local politics centring relief in the settlement under study is desperately practiced. The names form the victims list in flood became changed and altered through the local political influences. Mr. J. Santra told that- *the house of my elder brother was severely affected by flood a few years ago...the verification after flood was done and the name of my elder brother had been registered in the victims list...after a month...when my brother enquired about his claim...found that his name became altered with the name of another person who has lost nothing in the flood*. Political colour became a significant factor for relief in flood situation. Mr. S. Pramanik said that- *we expect nothing from the municipality or from the Govt...the issues of relief is strictly depended on the political colour we belongs to*. Data shows that the concern of relief in the village is depended on the political milieu and the dominant political players of the place.

Conclusion

The present study reveals multiple layers of flood and its orientation among the participants who are the actors to live the phenomenon. Different frames have been reflected in the study from the subjective stories of the respondents to relate their perception about flood with the wider issues of politics, welfare and development in a flood prone area of West Bengal. The study from its discussion is placing a hint to include the insider's perspective of loss and suffering to construct any policies and action on flood and/or disaster issues.

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