NATURAL DISASTERS AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE AGGRESSION: ROLE OF THE LOCAL BELIEFS IN POST-ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER RELATED TRAUMA MANAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Disasters are defined as sudden events that bring disruption to a society with human, material, economic and environmental losses or impacts that exceed the ability of the affected community to cope with, by using their own resources (UN/ISDR, 2009). These disasters create significant losses and damages to humans, economy and society. Despite the losses and damages created by disasters, some individuals and communities do not attach much significance to professional or scientific mediation in Post-environmental Disaster Management. Risk perception towards a disaster does not only depend on the danger it could create, but also the behaviour of the communities and individuals that is governed by their culture.

Over the past years, natural hazards have caused extensive losses and damages to human lives, physical facilities and socio-economic conditions of the affected communities. For instance, Tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 made a calamity in many countries including Sri Lanka creating losses and damages to disrupt essential functions and development goals of the economy and society. Further these natural disasters have increased stress and vulnerability of people and disempowered individuals and society hampering individual and community development even in the long-run. However, the degree to which these so-called natural hazards to be considered as 'natural' is being questioned (Haigh and Amaratunga, 2010). Similar to the views of Haigh and Amaratunga (2010), Wisner et al. (2004) states that natural hazard only cannot create extensive losses and damages, but poorly managed interactions between society and environment, contribute to convert natural hazards into disasters. Vulnerability of community towards a disaster can depend upon the factors related both physical and social elements of the community (McEntire et al, 2010) but do not need to totally depend on the natural hazard itself.

Cultural factors influence behaviour of people when facing to a hazard (Smith & Hoffman, 1999). They argue that during a hazardous situation, people not only consider the danger that they could encounter, but give a priority for factors like social values, religious beliefs, traditions, and attachment to a location in order to cope with the post-disaster trauma and to justify the victimization. In this sense, the study attempts to examine the role of local beliefs in post-environmental disaster management process of Deniyaya landslide.

METHODOLOGY

The study is exploratory in nature. The sample was selected based on purposive sampling method as the experiences and attitudes of the survived people and the family members, relatives or neighbors of the victims were aimed to be investigated. A sample of 30 respondents were purposively selected including survived victims, family members and neighbors of the victims and key informants who have better understanding about the history of the village.

Main data collection method was conducting in depth interviews to understand the coping

mechanisms of the villagers in the post- environmental disaster period. Narrative analysis method was used to analyze the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The famous anthropologist Edward Taylor (1924) claims that culture as the "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Similarly, culture can be seen as a tool kit comprising of symbols, stories, rituals, and world views which people may use in different situations (Sumner & Keller, 1940). These elements within culture are passed down from one generation to another and provide guidance for individuals to survive in the society. Some of the definitions for culture encompass a 'group element'. Schein (2004) defines culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions (beliefs) that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adoption and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid". Above definitions on culture implies that the cultural aspects can be considered valid and helpful for groups for their survival.

In this backdrop, the study focuses on local beliefs and its influence on post-disaster management. Landslide experience in Deniyaya witnessed how local beliefs can help people to solve the problems that they face within the operational area of that particular local beliefs. Deniyaya; being a village close to Sinharaja rain forest which is a world heritage, inherits a number of environment-linked livelihoods. As a result of the weather conditions and natural soil conditions, most of the villagers are employed in tea plantation economy either as their main source of income or at least as a part of their income. More importantly, the hilly geographical structure of the land has created many inherent occupational patterns for the villagers.

At the same time, 'Getabaru Temple' which is famous for 'Getabaru Rajjuru Bandara God' is playing a major role in villagers' livelihood pattern and practices. When considering the livelihood patterns specific to this area, it is evident that people rely on the intangible assets such as traditional customs and knowledge, practices, beliefs, skills, and social institutions, sacred sites, language, identity. There is a strong link between culture and livelihood and there is an emphasis that livelihood must work within culture and tradition. The study identified a number of factors that are affected by local beliefs which is a part of the culture such as risk and vulnerability; access to and control of resources; choice and success of livelihood strategies; the incentives that people respond to; societal norms, gender roles and relations.

In post-disaster period of the Deniyaya landslide, the lost lives and properties have made an irreversible impact on their social and economic life. The mediation of professionals such as volunteers, counsellors, social workers from NGO, INGO and government sector was reported increasingly in order to manage the post- disaster trauma of the community and to reduce the disaster risk both materially and non-materially. Interestingly, the community resilience mechanism towards managing the post disaster impact indicates that the local beliefs narrated around 'Getabaru Rajjuru Bandara God' have played an identifiable role in coping up with the post disaster trauma.

It was found that the local belief system has functioned as a progressive force in post disaster risk management. It was evident that culture has become a factor for the survival of the communities from disasters. The community has narrated a belief about this landslide which has more tendency to be a folklore about the community in future to justify the adverse impact caused by the disaster. As it was evident in the study, villagers have identified the damaged or lost lives and properties as those which went against the customs and ritualistic practices of the 'Getabaru Rajjuru Bandara God'. Specially, it was pointed out that the people

and their properties which were destructed by the landslide had been established in a non-ecofriendly manner by invading the area of God (Deviyange Adaviya). The community believes even to cut off a tree of the said' deviyange adaviya (area of god), the permission of god Rajjuru Bandara should be obtained by performing relevant cultural rituals. By looking at the lost or damaged lives and properties, community analyse the disaster as an expression of the aggression of 'Getabaru Rajjuru Bandara God' in order to punish people to prevent damaging the eco system of deviyange adaviya. After the tragic landslide in Deniyaya, the community has started to collectively perform rituals annually to 'Getabaru Rajjuru Bandara God' as a way of apologizing for what people did to provoke the aggression of the god and to ensure that they will not be subjected to a similar aggression of the god again. This can be identified as an interesting, community born, local mechanism to overcome the post disaster trauma in post environmental disaster management process.

CONCLUSIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Mainly, the findings indicate that the trauma caused by the disaster has been overcome by handing over the responsibility of the calamity to the supernatural being who is a major character in their local community life. More importantly, the professional and systematic processes have failed to make a positive post disaster recovery mediation whereas the local beliefs have been succeeded. Therefore, it can be argued that culture has the power of increasing or reducing vulnerability of communities towards disasters and the management of the post disaster situations.

Though the community has succeeded in managing the psychological and spiritual impacts with the help of their local belief system, the material impacts such as economic lost still requires the mediation of professionals from government and NGO sector. Through that, it can be concluded that it is difficult for them to withstand the effects of disasters and survive on their own by strictly adhering to cultural believes whilst totally relying on the indigenous knowledge on disasters.

Therefore, it is important to integrate positive aspects of culture towards effective post-disaster management mechanism and prevention of negative human acts that cause man-made disasters while reducing negative impacts of the local cultural beliefs that might be resulted in reversing the impact of formal professional interventions of post-disaster risk management process. Giving due consideration to cultural aspects of communities and providing appropriate scientific mediation to increase community resilience against natural disasters can be identified as a way forward to effectively integrate culture, disaster risk reduction and post-disaster management.

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