Chapter – 3

Communities facing Disasters

When we speak of disasters it is always in relation, to how they affected people, and people in communities. A disaster is said to have taken place only when people are affected in a natural event or man-made event, such as a cyclone or earthquake or a chemical accident. Even when disasters occur, one needs to mention that it is not people as individuals who face the disasters, but several people in groups get affected. When they face disasters as groups there are various other aspects and characteristics, such as the caste they belong to, the class they belong to etc, that cannot be treated as universally similar, but are uniquely visible in disaster situations. These characteristics that people posses as individuals and members of groups cause differences in the impact of disasters on the people, as well as how, and in which way, they respond to the disasters. It is therefore, essential to discuss the relevance and place of ‘community’ in the literature, and in this context of disasters.

When a disaster strikes, one of the noticeable facts is the response of the communities facing the disaster (Palm 1990). To some theorists disasters bring about sudden changes in the living conditions of communities and they are forced to react to the disasters irrespective of their occupational differences, status, caste or cultural differences. After a disaster strikes what they are left with is either broken or lost homes, and missing near and dear ones if it was a severe cyclone or a tsunami, or if it was a drought they are left with hunger and dying domestic animals (Ibid.). However, when disaster strikes, in whatever form or intensity, it tends to be a totalizing event or process, affecting most aspects of community (Oliver-Smith 1996). Hence, it has been called a “natural laboratory” or *crise revelatrice*, as the fundamental features of society and culture are laid bare in stark relief by the reduction of priorities to basic social, cultural and material necessities (Sahlins in Oliver-Smith 1996). Disasters
and their subsequent responses are by their very nature unique social problems (Kreps and Drabek 1996; Quarantelli 1996).

**Concept of community**

The present study focuses on community coping and adaptation processes, and this section reviews the concept of community in the literature. The community remains a potent symbol in political and intellectual life. However, Brint suggests that however, it has largely passed out of sociological analysis because of the lack of a proper typology and generalisation. Controversies on the meaning of the term have been immense, with 94 separate definitions being available by the 1950s (Brint 2001).

Two lines of development of the concept of community can be discerned in sociology, of which Toennies’ was an aggregated approach, while Durkheim used a disaggregated approach. Toennies’ approach was to detach himself from perennial debates concerning the superiority of villages or urban ways, to separate these ways of life conceptually from their familiar spatial contexts and to attempt to identify the dominant features and qualities of each way of life. He developed the concept *gemeinschaft* (community), associated with common ways of life, common beliefs, concentrated ties and frequent interaction, distance from centres of power, and *gesellschaft* (the society) as one with dissimilar ways of life, dissimilar belief, dispersed ties and infrequent interaction, and proximity to the centres of power. This approach has an obvious problem that the qualities do not necessarily line up together on one side of a conceptual divide (Brint 2001).

Durkheim’s approach came as an important alternative to Toennies’ typological approach. Durkheim saw community not as social structure or physical entity but as a set of variable properties of human interaction that could be found in any stratum of people such as peasants of villages, or sophisticated denizens. He was ‘impressed by the importance of community relations for equipping human beings with social control and moral sentiments’ (Brint 2001: 3). Taking into account Durkheim’s
community approach, Goffman (1967) and other sociologists endeavoured to extract more precise and narrowly defined variables in the concept of community. They regarded six *gemeinschaft*-like properties as important, when they were disaggregated as variables in sociological analysis. They are classified as structural and cultural variables. Structural variables are — 1) dense and demanding social ties, 2) social attachments to and involvements in institutions, 3) ritual occasions, 4) small group size. Cultural variables are — 5) perception of similarity with physical characteristics, expressive life styles, and 6) common beliefs in an idea of system, moral order, institution or group. As these properties are not found universally, focusing more on the properties themselves than on the context in which they are found would be more fruitful as analytical tools.

Brint discussed the importance of using these variables in the works by Durkheim himself, where he ‘emphasized the importance of dense and absorbing webs of social ties in the chapters of *Suicide* on egoistic suicide’, or by Homans’ (1950) work on the association of dense social ties with ‘conformity to dominant morality in society’ (Brint 2001: 4).

In spite of all these works, the community studies tradition is seen as a failure, because it failed to yield a cumulative set of generalisations about human social organisations. A new typology of community was formed on the basis of changes that have occurred in the society, like the formation of computer groups. The typologies of major structural subtypes of community were based on the context of interaction among members’ primary motive for interactions, and rates of interactions, using the smallest possible partitioning variables. The subtypes of communities thus formulated are communities of place, dispersed friendship networks, communes and collectives, localized friendship networks, virtual communities. Virtual communities are the communities in which members interact through the medium of computer technology (Brint 2001).

The community as a concept has undergone changes over the years. It has faced ups and downs as far as its suitability to the society is concerned. When one looks at developed societies such as the American society one could see the dominance of *gesellschaft* characteristics rather
than of *gemeinschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* or community is seen to be representative of tradition and the past, gradually being referred to as parochial, folkloric, and backward. In the late twentieth century the community is seen to have resurfaced as a force in its own right in American society. The cause for its resurgence is disenchantment with *gesellschaft* modernity, lacking in shared experiences, shared memories, shared terrains and shared goals. Keeping in view the changes that have taken place in the present world, the community that is required is one that has a collective framework, participation in a common enterprise, a sense of solidarity that transcends individuals and private networks, and a sense of mutual obligation and responsibility for social survival (Keller 1988).

Community is referred to as a form of social organization. In a community, members of the group share the basic conditions of common life. The mark of a community is that one's life may be lived wholly within it. All of one's social relations may be found within a community (Mclver and Page 1971). Communities are characterised by continuity, cohesion, boundedness and adherence to tradition. Communities and their specific cultures also provide the basis for the identity of the individual members as well as their primary social context (Upadhyay 2001). Community is integrally linked with culture in the conservative strain of thought as well. As community is the repository of culture, language, human values, meaning and social organisation, it is also the primary source of sociality for individuals, without which they suffer from alienation and rootlessness. Communities have histories and affective bonds. Conservative philosophy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries defined community in terms of its opposition to the individual as well as to the state, market and modern society. Scholars who belonged to this stream of thought were Durkheim and Tönnies. In anthropology, social groups came to be identified primarily in terms of their culture or 'customs', the continuity and integration which enables communities to be reproduced. As culture differentiates one community from another and is the primary source of social identity, all members of a community are essentially seen to be alike (Durkheim's *collective conscience*). In the Indian context, scholars
such as Dumont saw caste as an important part of the community system in Indian society. This strain of thought is also called the substantivist type. A new understanding of community called the constructivist strain has also been developed, which draws on Foucault and Said to argue that caste and other community identities were in a sense invented under colonialism by the operation of certain political and discursive processes. They also see the colonial state as responsible for creating such identities i.e., political construction of caste and communal identities (Upadhyay 2001).

Most concepts of community positively delineate the degree of heterogeneity of human group life (Hillery 1955). Community is contrasted to “non-communal relations of competition or conflict, utility or contractual assent” according to Nisbet (1966: 48) or relations in which individuals exchange or cooperate for each one’s personal ends. Therefore, it is seen as a value-laden and morally charged concept because it implies a perspective of human group life in which a certain group of people share obligations and expectations with one another. Warburton (cited in Shin 2008) defined community as an aspiration, rather than a reality, and a dynamic process rather than a thing, in which people work together for a better life and world. Undeniably, many scholars assume community as good, to sustain such values as tolerance and diversity (Shepherd & Rothenbuhler cited in Shin 2008).

According to Etzioni, there is an ongoing debate on the tussle to maintain social order and autonomy of individuals, and he talks about striking a balance in the two so that there can be communities which are responsive to the true needs of the members. “Only a community that is responsive to the ‘true needs’ of all its members, both in the substance of its core/shared values and in its social formation, can minimize the penalties of order and the dangers of autonomy. I refer to such a community as an authentic community and to all others as partial or distorted communities” (Etzioni 1996: 1). In that sense a community is truly responsive when it takes care of the needs (in terms of the allocation of resources, application of power) of all the members and not only some of them. If a
community is responsive it can reduce the contradictions i.e., fundamental contradiction between the society's need for order and the individual's quests for autonomy. He also mentions that in the quest towards individualism the supporters of libertarianism have overlooked aspects of community such as the importance of shared culture, history, social bonds, and social structure. Etzioni provides two defining characteristics of community- First, “...it entails a web of affect-laden relations among a group of individuals, relations that often crisscross and reinforce one another (rather than merely one-on-one relations or chains of individual relations); and secondly, community requires a commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity—in short, a shared culture” (Etzioni 1996: 5). He also suggests that communities consist of ‘collective, historical actors and not merely grand individuals’. Communities do not mean only ‘aggregates of persons acting as free agents’, but also ‘collectives that have their own identities and purposes and can act as a unit’ (Ibid).

Warren (1978: 09) defined community as that “combination of people and social group which performs the five major functions relevant to a locality. They are production/consumption/distribution, socialization, social control, social participation and mutual support”. The community has an essential role in its members surviving disasters, because people live as groups and face disasters as a group rather than alone. It is in the form of dense demanding social ties that bind the people, or the role of the community in fulfilling the needs of its members as mentioned by Etzioni (1996). According to him, the community comes in at all phases of a disaster, from preparedness, to actually facing it, and in recovery as well.

Disasters have a tremendous disruptive impact on the functioning of social systems, and social organizations must somehow rise to deal with human problems thus created (Form et al 1956). In this context community responses and disasters may be better understood in terms of the social roles that its members play in the emergent social systems that are organically related to previously existing social systems. Form et al (Ibid) looked at the different types of disasters (tornado, flood, and bombing) to
shed light on the persistence and emergence of social and cultural systems in disasters. An additional observation was on the type of community structure involved and the cultural values of the affected groups. This was because the rescue teams that were formed after disasters were based on previously existing social relationships in the community, such as the family, the neighbourhood and the school. This information would make it easier to analyze group behaviour. They assessed the behaviour of groups on the basis of gemeinschaft-like folk and sacred or gesellschaft-like urban and secular behaviour. They emphasized research concerning social and cultural attributes of the social systems involved, so that behaviour during and after disasters could be adequately understood.

Some scholars discussed the variations that exist between community disasters (disasters directly affecting a community) to that of non community disasters such as a plane crash in an isolated rural area. The differences were in terms of behavioural responses and conflict situations that arise after a disaster, according to the type of disaster. The conflict situation can be deliberately made worse in a riot, as compared to a natural disaster. In a disaster, the homeless seek shelter with local friends and relatives (Quarantelli 2003). Quarantelli has also discussed the differences that exist between four social levels in four time phases of a disaster, i.e., the difference between the response of individual, organizational, community and society in the phases of mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

**Ethnicity and community identity**

In a disaster, it is people in groups or communities who face the crisis situation. However, it is essential to know what provides a community the ‘we-feeling’. It is reasonable to suppose that community bonding or for that matter any kind of group belongingness has certain foundations on which the belongingness is based, and this ‘we-feeling’ also has a role in disaster response and recovery. There may be various factors contributing to the perception of oneness or belongingness in a community. For example, it may be an identity based on ethnicity, culture, caste or
occupation. Identity means, ‘to know who one is’ (Kidd 2002: 27), to have a sense of ‘similarity’ with some people and a sense of ‘difference’ from others (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In understanding identity one needs to discuss the term from the perspective of “categories of practice” and “categories of analysis”. Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 4) mention that “Identity” as a term in interpretative social science and history is at the same time a “category of practice” and “category of analysis”. “Category of practice”, following Bourdieu (in Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4), means something what others would refer to as “native” or “folk” or “lay” categories and, “these are categories of everyday social experiences, developed and deployed by ordinary actors as opposed to experience-distant categories used by social analysts.” In that sense “Identity” for ordinary actors means “to make sense of themselves, of their activities, of what they share with others and how they differ from others” (Ibid). They refer to “identity” as both a “category of practice” and “category of analysis” as they find close connection and mutual influence in the practical and analytical use of the term.

Social identity means a collective sense of belonging to a group. In the formation of a community it is the shared sets of meanings that enable people to act and interact with one another, and thereby identify themselves with the group. There are various identities that an individual may simultaneously possess such as gender, age, nationality and so on, but not all can generate a “we-feeling” to form a community. Certain identities have a greater bearing on the building up of characteristics such as a feeling of belongingness to a group or community.

Ethnicity is a factor contributing to the formation of a sense of belongingness to a community. Ethnicity rests on language, religion, culture, racial distinctiveness or appearance, region, and ancestry. These are important, though not persistent factors, around which ethnic identity tends to build up (Hunt and Coon in Parsons 1978; Nagel 1994). Language, for example, is a basic means of interaction and communication of ideas and thoughts, and a sense of oneness is found among those people who speak a common language, especially when they
are located in a place where others speak a different language. This difference sometimes acts as a barrier to the free flow of thoughts between people speaking different languages, besides creating a greater feeling of oneness with one’s own language group because of the shared means of interactions in a place where a different language is spoken. Ethnicity is "the reach for groundings" (Hall 1991: 35, 36) and on the other hand it defines "distinctive groups of solidarity," or strategic alliances demanding recognition, both conceptual and material (Parsons 1978: 53).

Ethnic groups are traditionally mutually exclusive (Parsons 1978). A common culture with some temporal continuity from the past becomes an important general core for ethnic group formation. Geertz (quoted in Yinger 1985: 158) emphasises the primordial ties, the "longing not to belong to any other group," as the critical defining characteristics of ethnicity, a criterion not easily applied to most persons in modern societies. Ethnic identity is also related to external stimuli, and may vary with changes in the context, but sometimes it becomes independent or functionally autonomous of the stimulus that produced it (Horowitz 1978: 119). For example, a Bengali Hindu woman may identify herself as a Bengali in one circumstance, and Hindu in another; or a Lebanese will identify himself with his sectarian affiliation in one context, and under another, may embrace his Christian or Muslim affiliation (Horowitz 1978: 118).

Ethnicity also depends on the perception of others, who do not belong to the group, that the group in question is different, the perception of those in the groups that they are different from the others, and also on the fact that those in the same group with the same identity share activities based on their ‘sameness’, whether real or imaginary (Yinger in Kidd 2002). “Membership in an ethnic group is a matter of social definition, an interplay of the self definition of the members and the definition of other groups” (Wallerstein quoted in Horowitz 1978: 113). Ascription is an important feature of ethnicity, and ethnic identity is acquired at birth. However, there are possibilities of changing individual identities, for
example, with the change through religious conversions or intermarriage (Horowitz 1978). Features such as shared sameness, and collective consciousness tend to create a sense of community feeling, a ‘we-feeling’ in the group.

Sanders (2002) points out to the main elements of ethnic identity as the ‘social construction involving insiders and outsiders mutually acknowledging group differences in cultural beliefs and practices’. The second element is the geographical origins and therefore social origins, which are foreign to the host society. He also emphasizes the need to understand the patterns of interaction that link groups and not just the cultural and behavioural components of the groups. According to Barth (1969: 15), “it is the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses”. The cross-group interactions are important because when interaction between groups are limited, inter-group differences gain emphasis, and these constraints on cross group interactions create ignorance about the other in the respective groups. Both Sanders and Barth emphasise the importance of not only studying the shared cultural content of an ethnic group but also study the ethnic boundaries that define ethnic groups. While discussing ethnicity in the context of acculturation and assimilation, Sanders also mentions that scholars had come to the conclusion that although acculturation takes place in two or three generations, assimilation lagged behind and, thus, ethnic plurality persists.

Ethnicity is above all a ‘collective identity’ which is a “self conscious and vocalised identity that substantialises or naturalises one or more attributes, the usual ones being skin colour, language, religion, territorial occupation” (Tambiah 1989: 335). Tambiah (in his discussion of increasing ethnic conflicts all over the world) also indicates that these identities are attached to the collectivities as ‘their innate possession and their mytho-historical legacy’. He emphasizes the importance of ancestry and descent, inheritance, place and territory of origin and sharing of kinship, and any one or a combination of these may be put forth as the claim of identity of a group.
Traditional panchayats

While discussing the concept of community in terms of Durkheim’s conceptualisation, Goffman and some other’s works have also been taken into consideration, who defined community more precisely and narrowly, and devised variables that could be utilised for analytical purposes. One of these variables is a structural variable i.e., common beliefs in an idea of system, and another a cultural variable i.e., moral order, institution or group social attachments to and involvements in institutions, can be seen as relevant to consider traditional panchayats that are found in the villages of India. Traditional panchayats are institutions, informally constituted by village communities to manage the village social order. These institutions can be seen as a system on which people have a common belief and are also involved in it as a group.

Traditional panchayats are institutions that include either just one caste, or an entire multi-caste village. As an institution, they have been in existence long before the statutory panchayats of the present, the latter being of the formal local government bodies i.e. the panchayati raj institutions. The term panchayat literally means a council of five elders (Thorner 1954). Traditional panchayats are prevalent even today, though not as widespread as in the past (i.e. before Indian Independence). The traditional panchayats do not have a common body of rules, a formal and established means of elections, or accountability. But they have functioned for a long period of time, and have had a role to play in village life. Evidently there has been some sense of order, possibly based on conventions that have ensured their long presence and continued existence.

Panchayats received some prominence when they were referred to by British administrators Munro and Elphinstone in the early nineteenth century. They perceived them as similar to their own (British) municipal institutions such as trade guilds. The panchayats at that time worked for social and economic issues. They dealt with land revenue assessment, regulating duties of the village servants, maintained caste relations, and
settled disputes. The British also tried to relate them to their structure of government (Tinker 1959).

The traditional village panchayats were not exactly a precedent for the panchayats and Panchayati Raj of today, although the name "panchayat" has been retained in the modern system as well. The present Panchayat Raj is a system of democratic decentralisation that was first introduced by Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1962 (Dey 1986). After the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1993 the Panchayati Raj acquired constitutional status, and it was made mandatory for all the states of India to follow the Panchayati Raj system (Patnaik 2005). They have differing but clearly enunciated sets of responsibilities and duties (though in broad terms all the Panchayati Raj Acts of the states have to conform with the requirements of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment). Following the enactment of this Constitutional Amendment, all the states were required to reformulate and introduce Panchayati Raj legislations which were in conformity with the requirements of the Constitution. Most of the states had to create a three-tier structure of panchayats (the smaller states, for example those of North East India, are required to have a two-tier structure), and elected representatives, with reservations for women (one-third of the seats, presently a few states have also implemented 50% reservation of seats for women), and for those of Scheduled Castes and Tribes in proportion to the population in their respective states. Some of the states had reservations for Backward Classes as well (this was not mandatory under the Constitution). The powers that were devolved to these institutions varied from state to state, with the minimum being what was prescribed in the Constitution.

Village panchayats

Two types of traditional panchayats were found in rural areas, namely, village panchayats and caste panchayats. Village panchayats\(^1\) were also known as informal institutions of local governance, jatiya panchayats, non state panchayats, etc. These village panchayats included the headmen of all the castes of the village. Its constitution depended on the social circumstances and relations of the village with other villages. Accordingly,
village panchayats might deal with matters of a single village or for several villages. They dealt with matters of local interest (Dube 1956). Srinivas (1959) described traditional village panchayats or village councils as informal bodies, with no established or fixed rules, no fixed rules about who should constitute them, how they should be selected, or all the functions that they had to perform. These village councils as Srinivas (1959) called them, dealt with land disputes, property disputes, etc., between different castes. Mandelbaum (1970) in his study of village panchayats from different parts of the country indicated a similar flexible pattern of representation. He distinguished two functions of these traditional village Panchayats, one of them was to redress ritual lapses connected with the norms of purity and pollution, and second, the settlement of civil disputes. At one time traditional panchayats were present in almost all villages of India. Krishna (2002) discussed panchayats in the northern states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh; Ananthpur (2004) has discussed traditional panchayats in the southern state of Karnataka; George (n.d.) discussed village panchayats in Tamil Nadu; Gupta (2001) has talked about these panchayats in West Bengal; and Bailey (1963) about Orissa. Krishna (2002) in particular mentioned the presence and relevance of informal and traditional village councils as an important part of the village system, discussing its role in dispute settlement and in the reduction of conflicts while enhancing harmony in the village. He established a positive relation between the presence of a powerful village council that people obey and the harmony in the village.

**Caste panchayats**

Baxi (1982) found that alongside the colonial system of law, there was a rich diversity of dispute-resolution institutions based on social entities other than the state, viz. the caste panchayats. Caste panchayats are also called caste councils. These caste panchayats were present in single caste villages, and in multi-caste villages, sometimes even when a traditional village panchayat was also present in that place. There was a caste panchayat for each caste in a village, composed of the headman and elders of that particular caste. They dealt with cases that had a bearing on
specific caste customs of a particular caste (Dube 1956). Caste panchayats dealt with intra–caste disputes. Srinivas highlighted dispute related issues of a village in his study and his description of the characteristics and functions of caste panchayats are related to disputes arising out of adultery, divorce, etc. (Srinivas 1959). Much time has passed since Srinivas’s study was carried out, and whether the characteristics and functions identified by him are prevalent even today is not certain. Caste panchayats in fishing villages, however, have various functions, not only to settle disputes but also in managing the regular day-to-day matters related to fishing as an occupation. Their decisions have a perceptible impact on the economic outcomes related to fishing.

Karunaharan and Thangamuthu (2006), talk about ‘the Pattinavar’ fishing community panchayats, while discussing the emergence of social organisations and their role in efforts to remove deficiencies in fish markets. They are intended to address the difficulties faced by fishermen in disposing their perishable catch at the best price, and avoid becoming vulnerable to traders and middlemen. They located their study in a village called Egatoor Karikkattukuppam on the Coromandel Coast (east coast India) located 40 kms south of Chennai. They observed the presence of a fishing caste panchayat (FCP) which has been a long tradition in this village. They consist of chettiar and sinna (small) chettiar that constitute the positions of the leaders of the panchayat. Along with them there are around five to seven panchayatars selected from each kinship group. From among the panchayatars a kariyatarisi (accountant) is selected. While panchayatars are selected once a year through nominations from different kinship groups, chettiars are hereditary and permanent. FCP, till 1950, used to settle disputes within the village. During 1950s and onwards they have been active in regulating fishing activities such as maintaining a register of fishermen, regulating the size of fishing nets that they are to use, etc.

The panchayat also collects funds from neighbouring industries and businessmen and uses them to provide succour to fishermen in need. With the adoption of the Norwegian technology of fishing via mechanised boats
and fishing gears, fishing became a lucrative activity. With the opening of markets the export potential of special varieties of fish increased, and their earnings increased as well. FCP arranged for ‘community lease’ to organise and regulate fishing and to ensure a minimum price for fish, and to reduce the risks and uncertainties associated with fishing. The FCP conducts the bid for lease of rights for the general transaction of fish every year where the traders would bid, and the highest bidder provides finances to the fishermen for the year. The highest bidder is fixed as the lessee and gets ten percent of the catch, and the remaining part of the catch can be sold in open auction. Apart from day to day general transactions of fish which is sold in open auction, the lessee helps the FCP to collect one or two varieties of fish (voor meer or village fish) from each fisherman according to his catch, which is sold and the money is deposited in the FCP fund. The lease amount is used for village festivals and helping fishermen during off-seasons. FCP also collects donations from salaried people who stay in the village but do not participate in fishing activities. There are different criteria of payment and different amounts. A wood trader would pay Rs 400 while a salaried man would pay Rs 100 per month. These people pay this amount as they get benefits from village funds without taking part in fishing activities. This amount is also used for the village needs.

There are other types of panchayats in some villages, such as van panchayat (forest councils), pani panchayat (water councils). These panchayats may be present along with caste panchayat or traditional panchayat. Van panchayats for example are not maintained solely by the villagers. They are also simultaneously regulated by the Forest department and Revenue department.

**Working of the traditional panchayats**

Wade (1988) suggested that traditional panchayats (village panchayats and caste panchayats) worked by negotiation and deliberation. This was because there was no formal rule or obligation to form a traditional panchayat in the village, and when it was constituted, there was no instrument of coercion that can force anyone to obey its decisions.
However, a limited coercion exists in the form of social ostracisation and punishments to people who did not obey the rules of the panchayat. They also performed collective functions such as providing monetary support to people in distress. Panchayats usually worked for a single village not for many villages at a time. Traditional panchayats collected funds for religious activities such as temple construction, repair and organise religious festivals in the village community (Bavinck 2001; Ananthpur 2004). Festivals concerning the village deity are considered as very important events which strengthen the social network and bonding within the villagers. Mandelbaum (1970) considered it a very important manifestation of village solidarity. However, this is a contested view. While upper caste people may feel it has a unifying feature, the people of lower castes who are asked to perform several activities that have been ordained on the basis of their lower position in the caste hierarchy, find these festivals very demeaning and humiliating, and choose not to do such work (see Kannan 2007).

Whether they had a caste panchayat for ten to twenty villages or thirty to forty villages depended on the caste composition of the villages and existing social bonds between the villages. The same principle worked in the case of village panchayats (Dube 1956). Common pool resources especially in the context of fishing communities are managed by the caste panchayats. Among other features, patriarchy is one of the basic characteristics of caste panchayats and village panchayats and all panchas are men (Bavinck 2001).

Caste panchayats and village panchayats were engaged in dispute settlement in the villages, which the villagers found cheaper and faster than courts. Disputes such as theft, encroachment issues, property disputes, cases pertaining to division of movable and immovable property, non-payment of borrowed money, distribution of grains, were brought to the village panchayats. Essentially matters affecting members of different castes were brought to the village panchayat while matters concerning a single caste’s members were sorted out by the caste panchayat of the particular caste, such as eating forbidden food, or pursuing an occupation
lower than that particular caste were dealt with by the caste panchayats of the particular caste. Issues related to marital problems such as bigamy, alcoholism, violence by a spouse, divorce, were also dealt with by the caste panchayat of the particular caste. Ananthpur (2004) also mentions that caste panchayats and village panchayats even provide support to the destitute such as widows, accident victims, arranging funerals for the destitute, organising mass marriages, etc. However, there is no clear distinction between the powers and functions of caste panchayats and village panchayats. In many cases, if a person of one of the Hindu castes had killed a cow or is found eating beef, or if there was a case of incest which came to the notice of people, both the panchayats (village panchayats and caste panchayats) might take up the case in consultation with each other (Dube 1956, 1960). There is also no clear indication of the success rate of these judgments. Moreover, in recent years there have been successive complaints of the biased judgements that were meted the lower caste people and women (Gomathy 2006). Although it is also mentioned that while the panchayat heads were predominantly from higher castes, people of lower castes still found it more convenient to come to them to solve disputes, because going to law courts is both extremely time consuming and costly. Cases involving women are brought to the panchayat by male members of the family who represent the women. Women were not directly involved in the deliberations of the panchayats. These features were also noticed in our study, in the caste panchayat that still work in the fishing village. However, functioning village panchayat was found in the agricultural village in our study.

Caste panchayats have a crucial presence in the fishing villages. Fishing villages are mostly concerned with a single occupation, although there are various jobs within the occupation itself such as catching fish, drying fish or selling it. This division of labour is overseen by the caste panchayat of the particular village. The caste panchayat head determines the rules for fishing in their territory, arranging for marketing etc. and manage the common resources of fishing. The introduction of new fishing methods or use of certain types of fishing gear is an issue dealt with by the caste panchayat along with the other villagers in joint discussions. They also
maintain the village’s link with the outside world such as the fisheries department, NGOs, etc. This was observed in Tamil Nadu’s Coromandel Coast by Bavinck (2001).

There is no prominent presence of village panchayat and caste panchayat in agricultural villages as in fishing villages. Wherever they are present, they are concerned mostly with the maintenance of the village social order such as caste relations. The roles played by the traditional panchayats differ from one village to another. The village panchayat managed the common property resources, such as in managing *Oornis* (shallow pond like structures, used to store water for drinking and cooking) in some coastal districts of Tamil Nadu, such as Ramnathpuram district in Tamil Nadu (George n.d). Retnam et al (2004) in their study of the Kaddaty village in Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu observed that the village panchayat played an important role in the community’s life. This was an agricultural village where the village panchayat had the important function in appointing the water regulator man and crop protector, two crucial functionaries in the village. The water regulator man controlled the water flow from the Savari dam to the tank in the village. The additional labourers needed for this work were also paid by the traditional village panchayat along with the water regulator’s pay. Likewise, the crop protector who protected the crops from animals was appointed by the village panchayat.

Village panchayats also sometimes managed common property resources. We find that fisheries are a resource that caste panchayats often manage. Common property resources include unreserved forests, water bodies, fisheries, ponds, grazing grounds. Common property resources (CPR) are accessible to the whole village and no individual has exclusive rights to them or their use (Jodha 1985). Stevenson (1991) identified certain important characteristics of CPR. For him common property resources are bound by physical, biological and social parameters. They had a well-defined group of users, separate from the persons who were excluded from use of these resources. He also mentioned that there were multiple users of these resources who had clearly understood rules among
themselves, regarding their rights and their duties to one another about the use of such resources. Stevenson classified Common Property Resources into several types depending upon their use for human beings and for nature itself. Some resources are renewable such as pastures, fish, forests, etc, while some are non-renewable resources such as minerals, coal etc. In many places it is the users who define the rules of management of the resources as they are the first to notice the deterioration of the resources (McKean 2000; Agarwal 2000).

The caste panchayats, village panchayats and the statutory gram panchayats exist simultaneously in various places. Not all places have a functioning caste panchayat, or a village panchayat, but all villages are expected to be included within the panchayati raj institutions. Naturally, when they are all present in the same village or group of neighbouring villages, observing the interaction between these institutions would be an important exercise, about how they function, and how they are related to each other.

Ananthpur (2004) in her study of Karnataka’s customary panchayats (as she calls them, which she also refers to as informal institutions of local governance or ILGIs) shows that there is a constant interaction between the gram panchayat and the customary panchayat. According to her, they are involved in various types of interactions such as influencing the election process of the gram panchayat. Leadership is often found to overlap. Village panchayat leaders play an important role in negotiating with the elected local representatives and institutions to secure benefits for the village, even when they have little involvement in the selection of the representatives. They persuade the members to take up development projects such as the construction of roads, and repairs of school buildings. However, these may be most beneficial to the village elites, as the leaders are mostly from among them, and tend to locate these projects near their houses.

The gram panchayats are also engaged in resource mobilisation for temple repairs, organising religious festivals, building new temples, cleaning roads, and helping gifted children. Gram panchayats require contributions
from villagers for development projects such as rural water and sanitation programmes. In these projects, traditional panchayats are helpful in raising funds, and other assistance from the villagers. However, when the formal panchayats are present, people expect them to utilise government funds, and they are reluctant to contribute their own money. This was seen in the management of the oornies. Oorni is a traditional drinking water system in Ramnathpuram district, Tamil Nadu. It is a shallow pond like structure, the clay soil of the area neither allows the water in the Oorni to percolate down nor does it permit the saline ground water to mix up with the Oorni water. When the management rested with the traditional village panchayat, people provided free labour to clean the oornies. The moment the function was taken up by the gram panchayats they demanded wages for their labour. The interaction between the gram panchayats and the traditional village panchayats was without conflict, though the moral authority of the traditional village panchayats worked on the regulation of access to water from the oornies at times of scarcity (George n.d).

**Traditional panchayats in disaster mitigation**

The caste panchayats and village panchayats both have a role in the process of disaster mitigation. As an important institution of the village, traditional panchayats in fishing villages keep funds for emergencies such as disasters. In coastal belts, the caste panchayats in fishing villages keep part of the fund collected from a day’s catch as a fund towards emergency situations, such as security during cyclone seasons when there is no fishing. They provide support to widows, old people, orphans and also to the poor who have lost their assets in the disasters (Bavinck 2001, 2006).

The caste panchayats and village panchayats also act as intermediaries between the NGOs, the Government and the community. All these actors prefer to provide relief material to the people through traditional panchayats. They believed it would be equitably distributed among the people. However, in a countrywide study of coastal communities affected by the tsunami 2004, Salagrama (2006a) showed that there was trouble when relief materials were channelled through the village panchayat and
caste panchayats. The leaders (traditional panchayat) who wielded power channelled these resources in their own ways. However, in the long run, it proved useful for the people. People received huge amounts of funds as compensation from the NGOs and government for the loss of boats. These boats were not built in larger numbers as asked by the government or NGOs. The leaders kept the money in a community fund. This fund was provided to those people who were listed in the government and NGO’s list of beneficiaries. It was also given by the traditional panchayat to those who did not receive any assistance from the Government and NGOs, as they had no boats in the first place, but were poor.

**Darker side of traditional panchayats**

Village panchayats are not universally benign in their functioning. Based on customary usages of inter caste interactions, it was always possible that the panchayat members, who were mostly of the higher castes, were less than fair in their treatment of the people of the lower castes. In some cases the village panchayats were seen to have given severe punishments to the Dalits and women. They sometimes engage in discrimination in relief distribution, excluding the lower caste people and women headed households. Similar observations have been made in the case of caste panchayats as well, specifically found to discriminate against women. In the fishing settlements in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, the traditional fishing caste panchayats were the ones who supplied the list of the affected people to the Government. Women in the village reported that they had been excluded from the list. The logic of such exclusion was the fact that the women were not payers of *vaari*. *Vaari* refers to part of the income of the fishermen, from their catch of fish, which is given to the village fund as a tax, and that is to be utilised during emergencies. Therefore, women cannot get the benefits of a house and other relief after disasters. The membership in the fishing community is based on the payment of *vaari* but membership is also strictly patriarchal, related to the fishing occupation and members are from within the village. Whoever does not pay *vaari* is not entitled to get the security of the funds of the
village. Similarly, Dalits who are not in fishing are also prevented from receiving any such benefits (Bavinck 2001, Gautham 2007).

Even when the traditional panchayats are not involved in any disaster relief as such, and in more normal times, they are found to act in an oppressive manner. Women were singled out for punishment by traditional panchayats if they were involved in any romantic relation or sexual misconduct. They might be punished with fines, or in extreme cases are publicly humiliated by making them ride a donkey, or make them walk on their knees through the whole village. Men also faced the same consequences but usually only if they were of the Scheduled castes (Gomathy 2006).

**Gender and traditional panchayats**

One of the most noticeable aspects of traditional panchayats is the absence of women in them. Caste panchayats or village panchayats, whichever one we may talk about, include only men. Women are strictly out of the traditional panchayat structure. The power of money through *vaari* payment and that of masculinity work here, as with the case of fishing caste panchayats. The sea is a rough domain where not all can work. Even among men, there are differences of strength and also inclination, and where some men venture into the sea many others fear the harshness of the sea and prefer to stay on land. Still, all men can, if they choose, be part of the fishing activities and of the traditional panchayat. According to Kalpana Ram (1991) there is a sexual distribution of space, where cultural norms prohibit women from gaining access to the sea and the beach. Among the Mukkuvars of Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu, young unmarried girls are perceived to have no legitimate business on the beach. Their lack of access to the beach means that unlike the men who spend most of their time on the beach, doing their work of stacking equipment, pulling nets, and even sleeping on the beach at night, women are not allowed to spend any time relaxing on the beach.
Women (only married and older women) can be present on the beach but only during the peak time of the fishing season when female labour is required to sort, clean and dry fish. However, a crucial point that needs to be mentioned here is that most of the work of cleaning and drying of fish is done by the women of the fishing community, every day, and not only during certain times of the year. This is so because most of the time the men are engaged in their fishing operations in the sea. The quantity of fish is large and spread over the open spaces of the beach, to be cleaned and dried. Women are the ones who carry out these activities on the beach. So the question of access is irrelevant when the community depends on them to do this work throughout the year.

Ram (1991) also reports that young, unmarried girls are prohibited from swimming or playing in the surf. They miss on the chance of even small earnings from their possible help in pulling nets on the beach, stacking equipment, etc. Boys are encouraged to do these tasks and some amount of the catch is kept for these young helpers. This is the time when they learn to face the sea and be familiar with it. Boys are encouraged to go out into the sea but they do not receive the full share of the catch. They are eligible for full share only when they are much older (Ram has not mentioned the specific age). Women’s inaccessibility to the sea is not given any biological reason of lack of physical strength, but is strictly defined as a cultural value which the community tries to uphold (Ram 1991).

Ram states that this behaviour of not allowing women to participate in the fishing activity along with men, or at other times to access a male dominated space, has a resemblance to the purdah system of north India, although the veil itself is not used. Ram also mentions that the sea is an untamed and dangerous place to work in. Hence, these fishermen practice various rituals to overcome the dangers in the sea and attempt to control the environment through these rituals. For this they call the parish priest (as they are Christians in that place) to pray over the boats. With the same intention to avoid dangers they also discourage young women to go near the sea, or beach, or even cross their path when they are about to
go for fishing, with the thought that women are potential dangers or those whose presence may cause failure to their ventures. This explanation also points to the control of men over resources and economic opportunities. Women are thereby restricted to domestic chores which often extend to include the cleaning and drying of fish by older married women but not young or unmarried women.

As the traditional panchayat is a public place, women are not even consulted in decisions, and are unfailingly kept out of the panchayat structure. In fishing villages where the women do half the work related to fishing, such as cleaning, drying, selling them, they are not considered as members of this section of society (fishing for instance), to be consulted when decisions are taken regarding their fishing occupation.

Even if they are involved in financing fishing activities, as with the women financiers of the fishing community of Andhra Pradesh called the Jalaris, where the women are the ones who control the local fishing trade and promote the fishing enterprise through finance, they lack any access to the political or public domain. They have considerable influence on decisions concerning the economic resources of the family. However, they, like other women, are excluded from political roles and have a limited role in the public domain. Unlike the Mukkuvar women, Jalari women financiers, known as marakatthes have access to beaches. Their presence is even required at the landing points of fishing boats. They have the first right over the purchase of the fish, at eight to twelve and a half percent below prevailing market prices, from those fishermen who borrowed from them. The person who avails the loan mortgages his boat to the marakatthe, and she has the first right on it in the event of sale or disposal of the boat. These marakatthes are trader women. They are involved in the retail fish trade apart from the loan business. They are richer than their sons or husbands, but have no say in matters of the household except for the monetary part. They are beaten by their husbands if they refuse to give money for alcohol. This indicates that though they have considerable power outside the home, in matters related to money, they have not utilised it to strengthen their position in
the social and family domain. They are still subordinate to their husbands. They have gained wealth but have not been able to improve their status in the family. Similarly, despite their economic power they are not represented in the caste panchayat. They do not ordinarily attend caste panchayat meetings except when disputes regarding marakattthe loans are concerned. Unlike Mukkuvar women, marakattthe women can attend meetings of the caste panchayat when issues relating to their marital affairs are being discussed. Issues regarding sexual misconduct concerning women are brought into the panchayat by the male members of their family (Sridevi 1989).

The varikkaarai group are the custodians of the village with economic, religious and political tasks, and have the use of collective property (the sea and its resources) and are invariably men. Women have never been eligible to directly access these resources. Therefore, they are absent from public life too (Bavinck 2001). Women have an important role in household work and expenditure. When it comes to the public sphere, they lack power. However, an improvement has been seen in the household, where they have some clout, according to Bavinck’s (2006) study of the Pattinavar caste along the Coromandel coast of India (from Nagapattinam to Chennai).

The case is no different in the agricultural community and the traditional panchayats working in those villages. Ananthpur (2001) reports that in her study areas of Karnataka, where the predominant occupation was agriculture she found that women were not present in the traditional village panchayats or what she refers to as ILGIs. Although ILGIs occasionally invited elected women representatives of the gram panchayat to meetings of the traditional village panchayat, this seems a special case, and not often seen. The general practice is to exclude women from the traditional panchayat. Even earlier excluded groups such as scheduled castes are now being represented in the ILGIs, but not women.

Although traditional panchayats exist in parts of the country, their functions in village life have considerably weakened. Their role has undergone changes over the years. With the gram panchayats and law
courts being available for the resolution of disputes, the importance of traditional panchayats has come down. Some scholars report on the near absence of caste panchayats, or that they are in an ineffective state in many places such as in Kangra (Himachal Pradesh) and Uttar Pradesh. However, as seen from the reviews about traditional panchayats wherever they are present, they have accommodated themselves with gram panchayats and work with them. They are connected with caste related issues, dealing mostly with inter-caste marriage problems (Parry 1979, Singh 2002). In certain communities such as those engaged in fishing, they are still active in village affairs including their occupation. Women have a very weak presence in the traditional panchayats, and their participation is virtually nonexistent. Nevertheless, they are striving to attain economic power and in some cases such as in the case of marakatthes they have been able to attend meetings regarding certain issues.

\[\text{In this paper the term village panchayat refers to one type of traditional panchayat, the other type being the caste panchayat. Gram panchayat refers to the statutory panchayat formed within the Panchayati Raj institutions. In some places in the paper village panchayat is also referred to as village council.}\]

\[\text{Varikkarars are the ones who pay tax called vaari.}\]