Chapter – 4

The Field and Methodology of the Study

The present study is on communities that perennially face disasters. The focus is on analyzing the lifestyles of these communities. These include the occupation, family structure, structure of the community to which the people belong, and the manifestation of community solidarity amidst risks and vulnerabilities that they face. How these various institutions are attuned to their survival in the disaster prone place is an essential part of the study. The other essential questions posed in this study include the perception of a disaster by the people who face it first hand, and officials who are the disaster management authorities. This becomes a crucial point as many of the life saving decisions taken by disaster management authorities are dependent on what they define as a disaster and what they do not. The gap in perceptions affects the people. The study also discusses various vulnerabilities of the communities facing disasters, and what they have done for their survival despite the vulnerabilities.

The study explores an important element of disasters, that of the people who face disasters. While discussing community life, the study brings out the connection that exists between occupation and vulnerability. However, the fact that these people have survived disasters also indicates the manifestation of community solidarity that may have a crucial role in their survival. Community and group identity are considered through a discussion of ethnic identities, that includes community lifestyles and solidarity, as well as caste and language.

Place of study

Much of the literature on disasters in India has focused on tsunami, floods, droughts and earthquakes, and those studies that focused on cyclone related disasters have talked from a disaster management point of view. This study focuses on disasters caused by cyclones. Orissa is found to be a suitable place since it has a long coastline, and also because it is a state that is periodically struck by cyclones, every year. The coastal
stretch nearing Andhra Pradesh is inhabited by Telugu speaking fishermen who are severely affected by cyclones. There are studies on a general impact on fishermen, and more specifically the impact of disasters on them in terms of death, or loss of income. However, there is a dearth of sociological studies of disasters and related issues such as community perception of disasters, and the impact of disasters on lifestyles and social structures. The people’s perceptions of disasters have hardly been discussed in any of the studies, and neither is there a discussion of community solidarity and impact of cyclonic disasters on social structures. An in-depth study on these aspects would shed some light on the communities facing disasters almost throughout the year.

Orissa is located on the east coast of India. It comprises 30 districts. It is among the poorest states of the country, with 47.2% people living below the poverty line (Bhandari and Kale 2007). Floods affect the state during the months of June to September, while droughts occur during the months of January to June. However, Orissa has been severely affected by cyclones, and those who are the most affected among the population are the fishing communities and others living along the coastal stretch of Orissa. There are several different linguistic groups who reside on the coast of Orissa and earn their living through fishing. There are Oriya speaking fishermen and Telugu speaking fishermen, and in some places even Bangladeshi immigrants who are engaged in inland fishing. What is seen is a predominance of Oriyas in inland fishing, and the Telugu speaking fishermen are engaged in sea fishing. We chose the Telugu fishermen who inhabited a village in the coastline of the state. A village where the main occupation is agriculture was also selected for this study to make a comparison between the two villages.

The Telugu fishermen inhabit the coastal area close to the neighbouring Telugu speaking state of Andhra Pradesh. Ganjam district falls under this area and has several fishing villages inhabited by Telugu speaking fishermen. This district is perennially prone to disasters of various sorts such as floods, cyclones and droughts. There were major floods in Orissa and those specifically affecting Ganjam district in the year 1990, 1995,
2003, and more recently in 2006. Drought has also affected Orissa, specifically Ganjam district during 1996 and 2002 (District Disaster Management Plan, Ganjam, Orissa 2007-08). However, this district is more often, and regularly, affected by cyclones.

We found this district suitable for the study as it is a disaster affected district with ethnically (linguistically and culturally) different people living near the sea. In Chatrapur block there were several fishing villages but we chose one village that was situated very close to the sea but was also accessible by suitable transport. Many other villages were not connected by regular transport. For comparison, we chose an agricultural village that is also very close to the sea, to see what may be different between the two villages in coping and lifestyle, as well as perceptions of disasters, when their occupations are differently affected by disasters (particularly cyclones).

**Research questions**

Certain questions seem crucial and are intended to be answered in this research work. These are:

1. How do the different communities perceive a disaster and adapt to it?

2. What measures are integrated into the normal practices of the communities even after the disaster, thus, becoming part of their culture?

3. Which are the institutions that are involved in the adaptation process, both within the community and outside it?

4. Among institutions outside the community, civil society institutions such as NGOs play a role in the relief and rehabilitation process, but, what role does civil society play in the adaptation and coping with disasters of both these communities?
5. An obverse of the above, how does the state or agencies of the state affect the lifestyles of the people in the disaster prone areas?

**Problem of the research**

The focus of the present study is to see how a community adapts and continues to live in a condition of regular and recurring disasters. Their lifestyle would be seen through various attributes such as their religion, occupation, political structure of the community (such as village heads or caste heads), and other actors such as civil society (mostly NGOs). While analysing the role of civil society another actor would inevitably be in the picture and needs to be considered in the study, and that is the Government or the state, whose agencies also affect the lives of people who live in a disaster prone area.

**Objectives**

There are three main objectives that have been identified as important for the research:

1. To examine the effects of the recurring disasters, on the communities.

2. To study communities living with recurring disasters, and analyse their coping mechanisms, and institutions such as occupation, religion, and political system, and examine how these are attuned to their survival.

3. To examine what possible roles can be played by the state and the civil society in the process of adaptation by the communities.

**Field**

Information on disaster affected areas was collected from a visit to the Orissa State Disaster Mitigation Authority in Bhubaneswar which is the main agency that works on disaster mitigation in Orissa. This agency provided details of disaster prone and disaster affected areas in Orissa,
and suggested a personal visit to various places before deciding where the study should be located. In the present research, three field visits were undertaken to decide the suitable field area for the research. A visit to Astarang and Jagatsighpur districts in December 2007 suggested that the areas were not found suitable for our work as the fishing villages were inaccessible due to lack of proper transport facilities, and some were resettled villages (villages whose inhabitants had died during the 1999 super cyclone and the government resettled the villages with people from other villages). On a visit to Ganjam district two villages were selected. These two villages were chosen because they are situated near the sea. They were also accessible from Chatrapur town (Ganjam district) by road.

A pilot study is ordinarily conducted before the main field work to get a preliminary feel of the area where work is being envisaged, and in some cases even to decide which area best suits the study. After choosing the two villages a third visit was to conduct a pilot study in these villages. In the pilot study certain questions were posed to the people to understand the impact of disasters and their lifestyle. During this exercise it was found that there are certain issues that need to be looked at along with issues that the literature had brought out, such as the adaptation to disasters, vulnerability and risks to disasters while discussing the lifestyles of the people. Another issue is the role of traditional institutions in the ordinary life of the communities as well as in the mitigation of disasters.

**Study villages**

These two selected villages have lived through many cyclones in the past. They are significantly different in terms of the occupations of the people inhabiting them. This difference in occupation provides for a comparison between two different groups of people who have been living in the same part of Orissa for a long time, and face at least one similar form of disasters every year i.e. cyclones. The very fact that these villages have survived the disasters of October 1999 (referred to as super cyclone), and perennially face cyclones, make the villages suitable for the study of coping and survival. The fishing village called Noliyanuangan has around 700 households engaged in sea fishing and allied occupations. The village
is just about 200 metres from the sea. The distance between the fishing village and the nearby agricultural village selected for this study is around two kilometres, and from the nearest town it is about ten kilometres. There are two main castes in the fishing village, the larger caste is that of Noliya fishermen, after whom the village has been named. The Noliyas also have sub-castes but they hardly mention them, nor does it make any noticeable difference to their occupation. They are originally Telugu speaking people who have resided in this place for a long time, and they do not know when their group first settled in this area. They are also ethnically different from the Oriya population of the nearby agricultural village.

There is a small group of people called Sundi who also live in this village. They are Oriya people, and are an economically better off group than the Noliyas. As the village is situated just about two hundred metres from the sea, in a cyclone prone area, there should be a good reason for these people to stay there (i.e. so close to the sea). Being fishermen, the Noliyas stay in this place because of the ease with which they can pull out their boats into the sea and get them back, as well as clean and dry fish on the sea shore. The Sundis are not fishermen, and they have been inhabitants of this place for about 50 years. While business is their occupation, they were earlier engaged (when they first came to this village) in selling alcohol to the fishermen of this village. Later, the fishermen decided to procure alcohol themselves rather than have Sundis selling it to them. The Sundis shifted to selling grocery, and to money lending. Fishermen are almost all the time in need of credit, whether in the lean seasons, or during ceremonies, and also the frequent disasters, to provide the Sundis with considerable scope for money lending activities.

The agricultural village, named Agastinuagan, is also a two-caste village, comprising the Oriya agricultural caste of Khandayats, and Brahmins. There are about 400 households in the village out of which ten are Brahmin families. The Brahmins are employed as temple priests. The Brahmins also own agricultural land, but due to their traditional practice of
not cultivating their lands themselves, it is the Khandayats who cultivate their land for them. This village is situated a kilometre away from the sea.

**Describing the villages**

As mentioned earlier these selected villages are situated at a distance of two kilometres from each other. The farming village is a kilometre away from the main road that connects the two towns of Chatrapur and Ganjam. The agricultural village has houses built near the *kuchha* road that goes past it and connects the village to the main road. The agricultural fields are located on the side of the village facing the sea and near the Rushikulya river. The houses have the road on one side, the sea and river on two other sides, and the fields on one side. Most houses in this village are built in rows with almost no space between them. These are occupied by families that are on the lower scale of income. The well to do villagers, and there are only a handful of them (three are considered wealthy, and have large landholdings and high income) have larger and more spacious houses, with a number of rooms in them. There is a large temple built almost in the middle of the village, where the Brahmins priests perform daily rituals and worship of the deities, and prepare the *mahaprasad* or the offerings to the deities.

The agricultural village has open wells at the end of the rows of houses. There is a pond near the village, which is also close to the houses built near the agricultural land. Water from this pond is used for small scale fishing, and for irrigating agricultural fields. Besides the *kuchha* road outside the village there is a bigger pond called *tampera* where people wash their clothes, and bathe. The houses are built in such a way that they provide some protection from cyclonic winds.

The fishing village on the other hand has a different pattern of housing. Small buildings that are used for the storage of fish are built very close to the beach, and boats are also kept on the beach. The houses inhabited by the fishermen families are built behind the row of storage houses. The better kind of *pucca* houses were built away from the sea towards the road that connected the village with the main road. *Kuchha* houses were
built nearer the sea. One of the main reasons for such a housing pattern is the lack of accessible land across the main road and towards the cashew farms. In any case since they also prefer to stay closer to the sea, this was the only place where they could build their houses. Newly wed couples who could not immediately build *pucca* houses built *kuchha* houses near the sea. This village too (as with the agricultural village) has houses that are built in rows, with no space between one house and the next. A few huts were built with some space between one another, but most of the *pucca* houses are single room houses, and share the same wall with their neighbour’s house. Many of these houses were built after the super cyclone in 1999 under the Indira Awas Yojna. The Sundis have two-storeyed houses built nearer the road, i.e. away from the sea. There is a high school in the fishing village. The school has a building donated by a corporate organisation, which serves as a school room in ordinary times, and as a cyclone shelter when there is a cyclone. There are two cyclone shelters in each of these villages. Both the shelters are situated at the entrance of each village.

There is a pond in the fishing village as well. Water from this pond is used for both bathing and washing clothes. The village has bore wells to get drinking water. While on one side of the village they have the sea, on the other side they have wild bushes, and cashew nut plants belonging to the three rich land owners from the agricultural village. The agriculturists and fishermen have been extending their houses towards the sea and towards the length of the village as they cannot cross the road and build their houses in the cashew farms.

As we enter the village we find a small temple of the mother goddess, worshipped by the entire fisherman community. When we go further into the village we find a bigger temple that was under construction when the field work was done. This temple is located at the end of the row of houses in the village, and no houses are built beyond that.
**Sample**

In the context of a community study, a comparison between two communities provides greater scope to understand and unearth the different aspects of community life that may go unnoticed when observed in isolation. In comparative studies qualitative research techniques are preferable (Sjoberg 1970) to get an in-depth understanding of social structure, the communities and the lifestyles of the people.

The common variable on which the comparison is based in the present study is the location of the communities in a disaster prone place, and both pursuing occupations that are dependent on nature, but are not vulnerable to cyclones to the same extent. From the fishing village we selected 60 households as the sample, chosen to include households engaged in fishing and allied activities such as fish business, and also including those among the fishermen who own a boat. In the sample, 30 female and 30 male respondents represented these households. For comparative analysis, from the agricultural village, a sample of 50 respondents, comprising 25 males and 25 females, representing 50 individual households was chosen. This sample covered the Khandayats and Brahmins in the village. The preliminary and general information about the villages was collected from the sarpanch of the gram panchayat. During the pilot study itself, some key respondents were identified who were residents of the villages and helped to gain access to other villagers. The snowballing technique was used to contact various people from different sections in the two villages. Specific individuals such as the caste head in the fishing village and the gram panchayat sarpanch were also interviewed. To get a clearer picture of how men and women perceive their lifestyle and adaptation in a disaster prone place, both men and women were chosen in equal numbers in each village. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used for the data collection. Where information on the cultural aspects and norms were required, data were collected from in-depth interviews of respondents, who were selected after the initial interviews. This method of sampling was preferred, as it helped in identifying the disaster affected families. Qualitative data were also
collected through case studies. Apart from data collected from the field, other sources of data were annual reports of the government, plan documents (District disaster management plans) and other reports (from NGOs for example, World Disaster Reports, India Disaster Report). Quantitative data were collected with the help of structured interview schedules.

The data collected were subjected to coding and categorising to find a pattern that surfaced, and interpreted with the help of relevant sociological concepts. The quantitative data were analysed with the help of simple cross tabulations. All these were first collected in a field work that was carried out over four months, and again in a repeat visit of a few weeks to fill in any missing parts.