Preface

Natural disasters have affected mankind the world over since time immemorial leaving behind a trail of fury and havoc of unimaginable proportions. All these are regardless of the tremendous advancements made in science and technology. The natural disasters like floods, cyclone, droughts and earthquakes have become a regular feature of our normal life. They are catastrophic events with multi-dimensional effects that suddenly disrupt the daily pattern of life. This necessitates an effective disaster management mechanism that could provide immediate relief followed by future reconstruction, rehabilitation and disaster preparedness efforts. It calls for a multi-pronged approach at the national and local level along with international cooperation to reduce the risks and vulnerability of the populace affected by disaster.

Involvement in natural disaster by international, national and academic institutions have led to a number of definitions and interpretations of natural disaster. The explicit definitions are those forwarded by academic institutions and of crucial importance for research in the area of natural disasters. The explicit definitions available on natural disasters include two broad aspects. The first aspect, which includes definitions forwarded by Cisin and Clark is where, disaster is viewed as an event, which seriously disrupts normal life. In Krimgold’s definition disaster is defined as a crisis event that outstrips the capacity of a society to cope or manage with it at least for a time. The emphasis on normalcy is to see disaster as an extension of everyday life. It also implies that an understanding of the threat of disaster is as important to the comprehension of the disaster as the disaster event itself. Hewitt and Burton (1971) developed this notion of potential threat and viewed disaster as a function of dynamic human-environment relationship.
The second important aspect, which requires consideration in a definition of natural disaster, is the dynamic human-environment relationship in terms of the notion of vulnerability. Vulnerability is the degree to which different classes in society are differently at risk. This is both in terms of the probability of occurrence of an extreme physical events and the degree to which the community absorbs the effects of these extreme physical events and also helps different classes to recover. The above view also underlies the United Nations, World Bank and Asian Development Bank’s current view that not every crisis event is a disaster. Disaster is defined as events, which usually have a ‘natural’ basis (winds, water, land movement) but which also have human and societal aspects. It is the negative impact of a natural phenomenon on human life—its economy, its society and its polity that justifies the term disaster.

Without people there can be no disaster. Natural disaster is, therefore, defined as the interface between an extreme physical event and a vulnerable human population. The inevitability of natural disasters and aforementioned conditions make disaster management a complex process requiring comprehensive planning and multi-sectoral management. The foremost question that haunts all social scientists dealing with the issue of disaster management in modern times is how mankind despite the amazing scientific progress continued to be a spectator to the fury unleashed by disasters. This question brings to light the varied inter-linkages between society, polity, economy and last but not the least environment all of which have to be carefully examined and explored in any research undertaken in this area.

Bangladesh a geographically small and economically underdeveloped country receives international focus mostly during times of natural disaster especially floods and cyclones that frequently strike the country. This occurrences cause untold misery to the already deplorable conditions of the poor and disadvantaged millions. Although
those most affected in Bangladesh by natural disasters are the least advantaged groups, little attention is paid towards developing their coping capacity in the face of their frequent exposure to recurring disasters. The cycle of disaster management in Bangladesh has only recently been considered in the broader context involving prevention, mitigation, preparedness, relief, recovery and reconstruction unlike the earlier emphasis on disaster response merely in terms of post disaster relief and rehabilitation that yielded temporary results at high costs.

Convinced of the vulnerability of Bangladesh to natural disasters and their devastating long-term impact on the poor, the UNDP has significantly helped the Government of Bangladesh to set up the Disaster Management Bureau (DMB) under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief. While the Director General of relief and rehabilitation under the same ministry is responsible for post disaster relief and rehabilitation, the DMB is charged with the primary responsibility of strengthening the capability at all levels to respond to disasters effectively. This serves as the catalyst for planning and management at all local levels. The activities are primarily funded by the various bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors, eg., UNDP, UNICEF, Government of Japan, DANIDA, DFID, etc. However, most of the aid received after disasters are spent on structural reconstruction projects with scant attention paid to non-structural measures based on indigenous knowledge of coping strategies.

This research work on the basis of analysis of the following three hypotheses, namely, (i) the better the integration between the developmental policies and disaster management policies, the lesser would be the vulnerability of the people; (ii) disasters cause a sudden change in the physical, social, economic and environmental functioning of a society thereby derailing the traditional development interventions and (iii) state’s capacity to effectively deal with disasters is related to the nature of
involved in the field of disaster management in Bangladesh. This is based on an exploration of the inter-linkages between economy, polity, society and environment that helps in understanding and evolving a strong cohesive disaster management strategy. This strategy involves all the elements of society in order to give a significant resilience in terms of reducing the future vulnerability of the disadvantaged populace.

This study is based on an analysis of two major floods of 1988 and 1998 and two major cyclones of 1991 and 1997 in terms of assessment of their nature and causes, impact, measures taken, lessons learnt and future initiatives by the two primary actors viz., government and the non-governmental organisations (ADAB-the supra body of NGOs, BRAC, Proshika, PRIP-DPIS and Grameen Bank-the national NGOs, CARE CARITAS and Bangladesh Red Crescent Society-the international NGOs). This also examines in great details their relationship with the local communities in order to help strengthen traditional as also evolve varied coping strategies in order to reduce future vulnerability.

In view of the catastrophic nature and colossal impact of both floods and cyclones, a series of structural and non-structural measures have been recommended. These are primarily aimed at minimizing the extent of loss and damage through better organization and development of an effective disaster preparedness strategy. Only this could ensure a judicious combination of disaster and development policies that will reduce vulnerabilities faced by the Bangladeshi populace mired in steep poverty. The NGOs role has been commendable through provisions of micro-credit and other long-term rehabilitation measures but a lot more remains to be done.
A concerted and collaborative effort of the government, NGOs and local communities is required to ensure the success of a disaster management policy that focuses on disaster preparedness. It is intertwined with both the short term and long term developmental needs of the country to help build the capacity of the people to cope with the disasters. The people of Bangladesh have to learn to live with disasters as they have in the past through an open approach to flood and cyclone management.

This research work therefore, makes an attempt to study two important natural disasters, floods and cyclones in Bangladesh. The study also focuses on the subsequent management activities undertaken to mitigate, minimize and prevent, if possible, the havoc caused by these natural disasters.

The first chapter ‘Natural Disasters: A Conceptual Discourse’ comprises of a conceptual framework of planning and management of natural disasters. The Chapter analyses the plethora of views that have been forwarded with regard to the concept and modalities of disaster management by different scholars engaged in research in this field. The chapter begins with an analysis of the concept and meaning of disaster and the properties that differentiate it from an emergency. In trying to explore the human linkages in disasters and the need for an emphasis on vulnerability reduction as the key to disaster management, the chapter suggests that the classification of floods and cyclones under natural disasters though broadly accepted are for convenience sake as would also be seen in the subsequent chapters, Natural disasters being an outcome of an interaction between natural events and human actions, not all natural disasters are exclusively natural, referred to as ‘acts of God’ but also as ‘acts of man’.

Moreover, knowledge of natural disasters has expanded with changing ideas about both direct and indirect causes and effects of such disasters. They have become
complex events with multi dimensional outcomes involving socio-economic, cultural, political, humanitarian and physical aspects. Thus the chapter analyses why disaster management research in the field of social science, while not denying the immense importance of a technocratic approach, definitely suggests an equal emphasis on the socio-economic approach, entailing within its fold both the developmental and environmental perspective. The chapter focuses on the management activities undertaken to mitigate, minimize and prevent, if possible, the havoc caused by these natural disasters through a comparative analysis of the approaches of United Nations, World Bank and Asian Development Bank and provides a blueprint for comprehensive multi-sectoral disaster management.

The second chapter ‘Flood and Cyclone in Bangladesh: Nature and Extent of Damages’ presents an analysis of the nature, causes, extent and subsequent consequence of flood and cyclone related disaster in Bangladesh. Though studied in a historical perspective, the period under investigation covers its formation as an independent nation-state to the present. The chapter focuses on two major floods of 1988 and 1998 floods and two major cyclones of 1991 and 1997 cyclones. This chapter provides a background, against which a critical analysis of the role of the government and non-governmental organisations in dealing with the disaster situations has been made.

The third chapter ‘Government's Role in Disaster Management in Bangladesh’ makes a detailed analysis of the policies pursued and programmes implemented by the government in the arena of disaster management particularly flood and cyclone. This further examines effectiveness of state and extent of state autonomy in coping with the disaster situations. The state capacity and present institutional mechanisms to cope with disasters is also critically analysed along with
the government’s present disaster management policy and future directions. The chapter focuses on the long-term measures so far undertaken independently or otherwise. The evolution of a comprehensive disaster management plan for an effective risk management of the vulnerable populace is also discussed.

The fourth chapter ‘Disaster Management: Role of Non-Governmental Organisations’ attempts to make a detailed analysis of the role played by non-governmental organisations in the field of disaster management. The role of selected national and international NGOs in the area of disaster management in terms of guaranteeing relief, short term and also long term measures entailing vulnerability reduction and building the coping capacities of the people has been critically reviewed. The accompanying conditionalities and political considerations in terms of international assistance during disasters and their consequent effects on autonomy has been looked into while evaluating the role, these agencies and organisations have played so far. The chapter also highlights the role of NGOs in bridging the disaster-development linkage.

The fifth chapter ‘Policy Implications: Disaster versus Development’ makes an attempt to provide a comparative assessment of the role played by various governmental and non-governmental agencies in disaster management in terms of pre-disaster prevention (risk management), emergency relief and post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation. The effectiveness of the policies adopted so far would be analysed in the light of various political, social and economic considerations and other compulsions that all these organisations, both governmental and non-governmental are faced with. The feasibility of evolution of a comprehensive multi-sectoral disaster management plan to effectively tackle the recurrent onslaughts of
floods and cyclones in Bangladesh has been discussed. This has been done in the existing political, socio-economic and environmental contexts.

The concluding chapter sums up the analysis and findings in all the previous chapters. It also assesses the extent of integration achieved between the development policies and disaster management policies in Bangladesh. This has been done to assess the efficacy of any existing feedback system and pinpoint the lacunae in the execution of the existing disaster management policy.