

Disaster within a Disaster: Social Vulnerability of Muthuvan Tribes in Times of Floods

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Abstract

There has been much appreciation all over the world applauding the Kerala model flood rescue, undertaken by the government as well as locals in Kerala, for their overarching methods of disaster management. In a dire situation where almost, the entire population was adversely affected, it is believed that the state machinery along with the people stood together beyond differences and discrimination. But the ground reality does not seem to be as Utopian as it sounds. The levels of destruction have varied across regions, communities and classes. The marginalized society of the Muthuvan tribes of Kerala, who are subjected to socio-economic discrimination for a long time had to face double vulnerability in times of disaster and in post-disaster aids. This is due to several issues like existing social discrimination, lack of knowledge about information technologies, Isolated location, limited social network etc. An exploratory study has been done through qualitative research to locate these problems. This paper intends to shed light on the necessity to create awareness among government, local bodies and communities to give special attention and consideration to the marginalized societies like the Muthuvan tribes in times of any kind of disaster so that more resilient strategies can be thought of and applied in future.

Keywords: Social Vulnerability, Muthuvan tribe, Kerala Flood, Marginalisation

1. Introduction

The state of Kerala is extremely prone to natural disasters and altering climatic dynamics due to its coastal location and steep gradient along the Western Ghats

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slopes. In 2018, Kerala witnessed one of its worst catastrophic floods of recent years (Aleem Yoosuf & Unaisudheen, 2021). According to the reports from the state government of Kerala, floods and landslides affected 5 million people, claimed 440 lives, and caused an economic loss of more than \$3 billion between 22 May and 29 August 2018 (Mishra & Shah, 2018; Panigrahi & Suar, 2021). The majority of the population was severely got affected in that period. However, the timely rescue work by the government and people altogether was incredible and received international appreciation. Even though, some of the marginalized people in Kerala had to facedouble vulnerability in times of flood because of the pre-existing social vulnerability. Cutter and Finch (2008) described social vulnerability as the inherent instability and sensitivity of social systems to issues such as poverty, inequality, marginalization, social deprivation and social exclusion. While according to Wisner et al., (2004) it is “the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, or recover from the impact of a hazard.”

Muthuvans are among those marginalized people in Kerala who had faced social vulnerability in times of flood. They are considered to have migrated from Madurai and they speak a unique dialect (Enavan Pech) that combines Tamil and Malayalam (Manjusha, 2013; Mohan et al., 2017). The Muthuvans prefer to live a secluded life, separated from the mainstream land. They have their own system that takes care of the administration and functions of kudy (which means settlement in their local language). They avail things for their survival from the forest which includes raw materials for house construction, food and medicine. Therefore, they hardly have to go out to mainstream society. The education level of Muthuvans is very low in comparison with the other tribal groups of Kerala with a literacy rate of 56.9% (Anusha & Atheequ, 2018; Mohan et al., 2017).

This paper intends to understand the problems that are faced by the Muthuvan tribes in times of floods to shed light on the necessity to create awareness among government, local bodies and communities to give special attention and consideration to the marginalized societies like the Muthuvan tribes in times of any kind of disaster so that more resilient strategies can be thought of and applied in future.

2. Methodology

This work is exploratory research that utilized a qualitative research approach to collect

data regarding the Kerala flood 2018. In the initial stage of research work, the researcher had met journalists, people working in relief camps and NGOs, etc. The researcher tried to maintain a strong bond with all these people for data collection as well as for creating a strong network for further studies. The target population of this research was the Muthuvan tribes of Odakkayam, a place in Oringattiri village of Malappuram, which is a district in Kerala that is vulnerable to floods and landslides (Singh et al., 2022; Wadhawan et al., 2020) (Fig.1). It was a news report that brought the social vulnerability of the Muthuvan tribe in limelight. The researcher telephoned the journalist to know the precise location of Muthuvan tribes and to acquire information about them in detail. Later along with one NGO named 'Thanal', the researcher went to their place to give relief materials for the flood (Fig.2). During this time of reliefwork, a strong relationship has been made with the people to know more about their problems. Only a very few studies have been done previously about the social vulnerability of any kind of tribal people in Kerala during floods. A narrative approach has been used to understand the living conditions of the Muthuvan tribes and their post-flood conditions. Other locals were also interviewed to understand more about the study area. Interviews were done during the relief work and surprisingly most of the people were willing to give the interview without any hesitation. The limitation of the research includes the minimal number of the target population for the study. Nonetheless, it could not be sidestepped as there were a very few people in that area. Still, this research can be expanded to a larger study area by choosing other marginalized people for a better understanding of the social vulnerability faced by marginalized communities during disasters in Kerala.

3. Results and Discussion

There are about 30 Muthuvans in the remote area of Odakkayam in the Oringattiri village of Malappuram district in Kerala (Fig. 1). It's a hilly area and densely forested. Hence, the accessibility to this area is very limited. The conditions were even worse after the landslide and flood happened (Fig. 3). The families in the far end areas were severely affected. They need to walk a long distance to get daily amenities. During the flood, the government opened relief centres in government schools and also provided accommodation facilities there. Although, most of the tribal people were not willing to go there because they find it difficult to mingle with the local people. Therefore, most of them did not stay there neither they collected any relief materials. Due to the

remoteness of their location, even NGOs and other organizations could not provide much relief work. There was a 93 years old lady named Nottiyamma, who was living in complete poverty (Fig. 4). Many parts over there had landslides. People were living in fear expecting landslides any time.

The majority of the population in Kerala followed updates associated with flood through social media only, which was lacking in tribal areas. The deficiency of information technology delayed getting disaster warnings and other updates to the far-flung areas of tribal people. Consequently, their shyness for being in contact with other locals kept them away from getting various aids from the government, NGOs and other organisations. They expressed a sense of negligence by the community. They stated that while some assistance is provided for them, but they have to walk a long distance to collect it. These people are very prone to landslides as their settlements are situated on hillsides. Due to the marginalization, their living conditions are so pathetic, and it becomes even worse and more vulnerable during disasters.

4. Conclusion

The marginalized society of the Muthuvan tribes of Kerala, who are subjected to socio-economic discrimination had to face double vulnerability in times of disaster and in post-disaster aids. The reasons for this were social discrimination, lack of knowledge about information technologies, Isolated location, etc. Being a secluded, separated and most uneducated tribe, they lack the information to access the basic vital needs during these difficult situations.

These tribes were expected to get proper facilities according to their needs and situations but they are socially challenged which made it difficult for them to ask for help. So, the government should provide special attention to them through more resilient strategies in the future.

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