

## **Role of Media and Literature during Kedarnath Calamity**

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### **Abstract**

Due to certain developmental reasons, in recent years, the world has been hit with a series of big natural disasters, especially the flash floods in Kedarnath, India. With the increase of natural disasters that have occurred in the past years it is expected their frequency will continue to increase in the coming years. Social media has played a significant role in disseminating information about these disasters by allowing people to share information and ask for help. Social media are also becoming vital to recovery efforts after crises, when infrastructure must be rebuilt and stress management is critical. Literary journalism brings together facts and fiction to represent some unfaceable realities of the modern society. It gives an insight into the hard facts, be it pertaining to natural disasters, social deterioration, or moral deprivation of values, etc. *Rage of the River: The Untold Story of the Kedarnath Disaster* (2013) is a book written by Hridayesh Joshi, senior editor, national affairs, NDTV India. This nonfiction lays bare the traumatic experience of many survivors who unfortunately became a part of the disastrous calamity which struck Kedarnath on 16th and 17th June 2013. The aim of the paper is to analyze the extent of using the social media and literature in the management of natural disasters and to propose basic guidelines for organizing communications and data exchange between the participants in such events. A brief overview of natural disasters is given. The term social media is defined and their basic functions and components are described.

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Social media has re-defined communication in today's modern world. Text messaging, the internet and social networking sites have made it possible to communicate with a large number of people anywhere on earth. It is an efficient and easy way to keep in touch and impart information, particularly in a time of crisis.

Social media includes web-based and mobile technologies used to turn communication into interactive dialogue. Online social networking services and social media like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Etc. can act and try to solve many problems during natural disasters [5]. During disasters all the conventional communications generally stop functioning at this time interval while social media or networking services stay active. Online social networks allow the establishment of global relationships.

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During natural disasters, and for some time afterwards, people affected by them ask many questions and are desperate for information. When this disaster took place, unlike in the past, we are living in the era of real-time information and media and the sources are many and diverse—radio, television, Internet, SMS, mobile phones, and so on. Yet, we could not find many of those real-time media playing any decisive role in finding solutions.

During Hurricane Sandy there were 20m disaster-related tweets in a single week. In December 2012, when typhoon Pablo struck the Philippines, a taskforce was assigned to analyze Twitter activity and map relevant information. They had analyzed 20,000 tweets in about 10 hours; the data collected had later become the basis for the official UN crisis map. When Typhoon Haiyan struck Phillipines, a surgeon from Iloilo posted a simple but urgent message on social media asking people to donate so that a medical team could be sent to Tacloban; within 24 hours she received more than 30,000 pounds. According to another report, Twitter usage in Japan shot up to 11,000 tweets per minute on the day of Fukushima quake in April 2011 from an average of 3000.

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#### **Kedarnath Calamity and its possible causes:**

It will take years to roll back the physical, psychological, emotional, social, economic and ecological damage wrought by the terrible floods in Kedarnath, Uttarakhand, which killed more than 1,000 people on 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> June 2013. The deeper causes of this epic tragedy were not natural, but manmade. They ensured that cloudbursts and heavy rainfall, which routinely occur in Uttarakhand's upper hills, turned into a catastrophe.

The causes include official policies and governance failures: aggressive promotion and runaway growth of tourism; unchecked, unplanned development of roads, hotels, shops, mines and multi-storeyed housing in ecologically fragile areas; and above all, the planned development of scores of environmentally destructive hydroelectricity dams.

Geologically, Uttarakhand is extremely fragile, being part of the world's youngest mountain range. Much of the state lies in the seismically "most active" Zones IV and V, with high tectonic activity that can suddenly alter the contours of land and the course of rivers. This greatly increases Uttarakhand's disaster potential.

Clearly, no lessons have been learnt either from the great earthquakes of Uttarkashi (1991) and Chamoli (1998), or recent major flash foods and other monsoon-related disasters in Uttarkashi and Rudraprayag districts, each involving death and destruction.

#### **Role of media:**

A number of relief operations began to restore normalcy in the state. One of them was online campaigns on social networking sites which were started to trace information of missing victims. Social media had shown a ray of hope to people who had given up all hopes of finding their dear ones.

People were able to post pictures or search or even provide information of someone they had information about. A Facebook page called "Uttarakhand flood disaster 2013: information, help and relief" is one such example.

The Facebook page, ‘Help Uttarakhand – 2013 floods’ has traced information of 50 people so far, according to the page moderator.

Other Facebook pages include Uttarakhand Disaster, KhoyaPaya, etc. The Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT), had also started sending out details of the missing people on emails to government officials and journalists through which tracing of victims became easier.

Another initiative during the disaster was taken by the State government of Uttarakhand when they created a Facebook Page called “Uttarakhand State Govt. Initiative- Operation Connect”, to connect missing people with their loved ones.

Twitter played a big role in finding out information about missing people. There were several hashtags created such as #RebuildUttarakhand, #Uttarakhandhelp, #Kedarnath, #Uttarakhand and #SaluteIndianArmy. People had been actively engaging and spreading awareness all across the world through which many families have been united as well.

Google had also made a personalized ‘Person finder’, a portal where people could type the name of the missing person and through the help of Google database it would provide information of the person. Using this portal more than 150 disaster victims have been traced so far. Anyone could provide or receive information which had made it really convenient and helpful. Press agencies and other non-governmental agencies’ contributions to the data had made it even stronger.

Even YouTube was flooded with the video posts of the disaster. Apart from publishing and broadcasting news, dedicated channels for the flood were also created e.g. FloodedUttarakhand.

The role of community radio is tremendous in natural calamities. A public radio station with a reach of 15-20km becomes highly powerful with the integration of mobile telephony in real time. The region, brutalized by floods, has only three community radios running—KumaonVani (Mukteshwar), Henvaivani (Chamba Valley) and Mandakini Ki Awaz (Rudraprayag). These radio stations have been broadcasting live programmes that inform and sensitize communities and tried to reach all flood-affected families.

### **Role of Literature:**

It is in this context literature is playing an essential role, especially, *Rage of the River: The Untold Story of the Kedarnath Disaster* (2013), a book written by Hridayesh Joshi, senior editor, national affairs, NDTV India. It is an important and timely contribution: to an extent, it combines the virtues of both the old and the new models of journalism. India witnessed another possibly manmade natural disaster. Now this natural apathy takes the form of a book that tells the journalistic side of the whole event.

Hridayesh Joshi and his colleagues go on a “journey without a path” in the Kedar valley as the violent tributary of the Ganges had left a sordid saga of destruction which had already been scripted on the hills of Uttarakhand and signs of disaster could be seen all around. Every pilot involved in the rescue mission was angry that the attitude of the government was extremely lax and had it been more pro active, many more lives could have been saved.

Joshi is of the view that the disaster could have been averted if not totally stopped as the disaster, as per him, was more of a man made one than natural. *Rage of The River* is the result of his reflections combined with extensive field work and research on socio-political, environmental and historical aspects of the disaster. While the author starts with the reporting on disaster, he quickly moves in to the realm of policies and politics of environmental management and mismanagement in India.

The book covers a whole range of issues, from the aftermath of the disaster to the making of it, to grief and pain of the survivors, to the why did it happen in the first place and also the long history of the environmental movement in the region. Joshi adds heart-rending experiences of many unfortunates who happened to be a part of the disasters. A priest and survivor in Kedarnath Ravindra Bhatt recalled on June 16 a huge sheet of water gushed down from the upper reaches and the area around Kedarnath was flooded. “Bhaiji, we were face to face with death – it was as though Yamraj was actually in our midst. We tried to calm down people saying have courage...this dark night will end...soon it will be morning...we will survive this,” Bhatt said. The next morning on June 17 morning Kedarnath was filled with water and dotted with huge boulders. “To save myself I had to jump into the swirling waters. I was in the water for nearly 15 minutes. And then miraculously the water deposited me on a side and I lay there for a long time. The next day rescue workers found me and brought me to safety,” (*Rage* 16) Bhatt said.

Chapter 8 (*Who Dug This Grave?*) and 9 (*Long Years of Struggles*) are the most fascinating segments of the book as in these two lie the core of the book. While chapter 8 traces the history of disasters in the state and response of the government, chapter 9 documents various movements for environment protection. Towards the end of the book, he presents a road ahead based on his understanding, observations, and interactions with locals, experts as well as those struggling for the environmental protection in the region for decades.

Joshi also mentions the heroism of the people who helped to save adequate number of people from drowning or being washed away. Village Dadoli’s elder narrates a saga of generosity:

We didn’t have enough atta, rice or dal. The roads were broken. We didn’t know when government aid would arrive. Nevertheless we all decided to feed these people on our own. We collected rice, atta and dal from each household. Everyone contributed and for full two days we offered shelter and food to everyone who reached our village. (20)

They made available cooked food for the starving pilgrims along with providing as much succor as they could in the trying circumstances.

Throughout the book, the writer ably presents his arguments using data, quoting scientific research and reports published by the government and its various agencies apart the ones prepared and published by non-governmental organizations and independent experts.

And he has tried to substantiate every observation with some evidence or the other. This is what makes the book reliable and very useful. The *afterword* by noted activist and environment crusader, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, is a value adds to the book as it lends another level of credibility to the book. Needless to say, it is a must read book for anyone who cares about the environment and is looking for an easy to read and understand book.

Finally on reaching Kedarnath Joshi found it in ruins. Through his research and interviews it can be said that What has come to the fore is the country's unpreparedness to handle calamities of this scale. "We need to rise from our stupor," stresses Joshi.

Joshi has documented facts which have been on record but suppressed. His is unbiased presentation because of his reliance on facts as stated by Joshi in an interview. This book lets the reader change his perception of the facts and fiction about the disaster. Biased or not, the book did give us a very real glimpse into the lives of the survivors, of what their lives were like during or after the calamity. There are things we learn that were not reported by any media outlets.

Thus this intermingling of literature and journalism and becoming of journalistic fiction involves exhaustive research and a closer and in-depth experience of the events. It is based on accuracy i.e. verifiability of the subject matter. It uses subjectivity and rhetorical approach towards reality. It employs scene-by-scene detailed description and attempts to give structure to otherwise transient and inexplicable events of past or current times.

### Conclusion:

Thus social media has emerged as a new way through which natural or manmade disasters are dealt with. In fact, today social media is being used for almost all activities be it directly or indirectly. With its proper usage one has been able to create an impact on the society. And use of social media during a disaster or emergency management is an entirely new outlook. Literary journalism, further, tries to provide motives and closure to otherwise frenzied experiences and presents live examples of individuals' fates over a long period of time before and after the event. Surely the authors' priority is educating or informing the reader.

The above discussion shows how social media and literature has changed its significance from being a medium of just communication to being lifesavers.

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