

Religious Rituals: An Empowering Mechanism for Risk Reduction (A Study with Special Reference to Pulin Utsav)

Dr. Nirja Singh¹

Available online at: www.xournals.com

Received 10th September 2019 | Revised 27th September 2019 | Accepted 04th October 2019

Abstract:

The rituals are patterned, repetitive behavior focused on the super-natural realm and the enactment of belief expressed in myth and doctrine. Regularly performed rituals are called periodic rituals. Non-periodic rituals, in contrast, occur irregularly, at unpredictable times, in response to unscheduled events. This article reveals the role of religious rituals in coping with the sudden events like, flood. In the spiritualities of many indigenous traditions, humanity is inextricably linked to nature. Heavy rains and river behavior are communicated and discussed, dispensing with the need for high-tech warning systems. A worldview that sees water primarily as a source of life, rather than danger, affects the way villagers prepare themselves to mitigate with floods. Therefore, there are some non-periodic rituals which are traditionally performed at the time of flood. One of the best examples is Pulin Utsav, which is celebrated only when the Yamuna water enters in Gyan Gudri, the village of Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh, India) on the river bank, a phenomenon seen once in several years. Thus, the study shows that religion is a key force behind the way a community or society interacts and cope up with environmental hazard.

Key Words: Religious rituals, Periodic rituals, Non-periodic rituals, Indigenous, Environmental hazard

Authors:

1. Principal, National P.G. College 2-Rana Pratap Marg, Lucknow -226001, (U.P.), INDIA

Introduction

Religion refers to all forms of belief systems based on spirituality, mysticism and faith in divinity in contrast with secular philosophy, which can also unite and identify groups, religious belief systems are those that center around some form or forms of the divine (Schipper, E.L.S., 2010).

Religious beliefs do not only provide a support system but it is a ray of hope in adverse conditions. At the same time, the worldview of any people provides a sense of identity for the entire community or group. Thus, religion remains as the most powerful forces influencing individuals and group decisions, livelihoods, perceptions of nature, natural hazards and associated risk and works as a key force behind the way a community or society interacts with notions of development and disaster.

Religious Rituals

The rituals are patterned, repetitive behavior focused on the super-natural realm and the enactment of belief expressed in myth and doctrine. Religious ritual has generally been seen as indispensable in deepening spiritual insight. The repetition of rituals instills religious values and attitudes in the lives of the worshippers. Ritual also expresses and emphasizes the things that bind a faith-community together and rituals portrays basic needs, values and aspiration of both the individuals and the communities.

Regularly performed rituals are called periodic rituals. Non-periodic rituals, in contrast, occur irregularly, at unpredictable times, in response to certain unscheduled events.

Risk Reduction during Disaster

Risk Reduction, which reduces the impact of hazards of a disaster, involves mainly three basic measures - mitigation, preparedness and advocacy. Mitigation is a way of reducing the frequency, scale and also the impact and intensity of hazards. Preparedness is a holistic approach which engages in itself the strengthening of locales, community, government and non-government activities to withstand, response and recover from hazards; whereas, advocacy is concerned with the social, political, economic and environmental issues, which are related with to the causes and magnitude of impact of hazards.

According to Schipper (2010), sociology of religion, cultural anthropology and ethnology are some emerging fields of academic enquiry to understand the role of religion in culture and society, and addressing the issues, such as religion and its interaction with,

among other things, science, technology, education and politics. Unfortunately the important role of religion in shaping perceptions and attitudes and influencing key decisions is frequently forgotten particularly anthropogenic interactions with ecosystems, including behavior and attitudes towards nature. Religion is a significant factor that is usually not discussed in mainstream debates and only a few studies have been conducted in this regard (Bolin, R.C. & Bolton, P. 1986; Schmuck, H. 2000; Campbell-Nelson, J. 2008; Reale, A. 2010; Schipper, E.L.S., 2010 & Harris, D., 2012). Against this drawback, this article reveals the role of religious rituals in disasters – from religious interpretations of disasters to the role of religious organizations in disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and reconstruction, through the example of Pulin Utsav, of Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh, India), i.e., a non-periodic religious ritual.

Methodology

The area for the present study was the villages of Vrindavan, situated at the bank of river Yamuna. Both the sources of data collection, i.e., primary as well as secondary sources, have been used. Local residents, devotees, priests of the temples and visitors were interviewed.

The data has been collected through quasi-participant observation. Maintaining the position of a researcher, observations of their activities and behaviour were done by remaining at the periphery, which helped in bringing out a vivid picture of the role of the religion risk reduction in a disastrous condition.

An interview guide was used to capture history of the area, profile of natural hazards and disasters that have affected the community, periods of occurrence of disasters, type of the short term and long term strategies they were used to adopt, religious activities during natural hazard which could mitigate and hence enhance the resilience of the community to hazards.

Result and Discussion

In the spiritualities of many indigenous traditions, humanity is inextricably linked to nature. Heavy rains and river behavior are communicated and discussed. Even in case of climate change, where the scientific certainty is rapidly growing and impacts are already being felt around the world, certain religious group hold on to different explanations of natural phenomena.

Flood in Hinduism: In Hindu mythology, the belief about the cause of flood is deeply rooted. The Indian philosophy embraces beliefs related that floods are caused to end the evil age and start a new phase.

According to Hindu religious philosophy, Lord Vishnu, one of the Trideva, is closely related with water bodies, even he abode in Kcheer Sagar. Lord Vishnu has taken several incarnations to protect the universe. Matsya Avatar according to Matsya Purana and Krishna Avatar in Dwapar Yuga are closely related with water bodies and flood.

The tri-rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, are amongst the most sacred rivers in India. The Yamuna is the largest tributary river of the Ganges (Ganga) in northern India and holds a very important position in Pushti Marga of ShuddhAdvita, where Lord Krishna is the main deity and various stories connected with Him are found in Hindu Religious texts, especially the Puranas.

Lord Krishna, was born in a prison cell at Mathura in the captivity of King Kansa. The night of birth was witnessed by heavy rains which led to river Yamuna being in floods. Pulin (banks) of river Yamuna was the favourite place, of Lord Krishna, so various rituals and festivals related to the river are celebrated. Of all these, one significant festival is Pulin utsav, which is celebrated in Vrindavan, when the water enters in Gyan Gudri, which is a religiously significant place and is believed to be blessed by the prolonged discourse - stream of knowledge by Uddhava, friend of Lord Krishna to the gopis and gopas.

Flood in Vrindavan and Celebration of Pulin Utsav

Pulin Utsav is celebrated only when the Yamuna water enters in Gyan Gudri, sandy banks of river Yamuna at Vrindavan, a phenomenon seen once in several years. Most recently, it was celebrated in September, 2010, after the huge gap of 32 years, as the last time water reached at Gyan Gudri was in the year 1978.

As the Yamuna river rose and touches the step of the holy Lal Gudri temple, spilled its water onto its banks in the holy town of Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, India, hundreds and thousands of devotees and pilgrims, turned up to be part of the glorious event at the riverside and set lit lamps afloat in the water to celebrate the auspicious ceremony of 'Pulin Utsav'. Pilgrims, who came to visit the various temples devoted to the Lord Krishna, were feeling blessed to have arrived at the time of the spiritual glory of river Yamuna.

All Vrindavan temples sent diyas (earthen lamps) to this place. People continued to light lamps on the river banks until the water receded. According to them they were praying to thank the river Yamuna and to ensure that it stays peaceful. The prayers were being offered to maintain peace and calmness in the river - so that it does not bring any harm to the residents. Devotees

turned up in large numbers and spent hours at the ghats, floating lamps and offering special prayers to the river.

The flood situation was very severe as the neighbor districts like Agra were the worst hit by the swollen Yamuna, dozens of villages had been cut off and the water had inundated thousands of acres of farm lands. However, in the flooded area of Vrindavan, there was no panic or frustration. Even, the people were celebrating the Pulin Utsav at the time of this natural hazard, because they feel that perhaps the Yamuna was in spate this year just like centuries ago when Lord Krishna was born. As the flooded river meanders its way through the land of the cowherd God, hordes of curious people have converged on the ghats (river banks) in Vrindavan.

Devotees and pilgrims coming here were ecstatic to see the Yamuna in its full glory, just the way it once used to be. The water level in the river crossed the lower danger mark of 495 ft. (Times of India, 2010), bringing alive the legend of Krishna, when the newly born Lord Sri Krishna lowers his feet into the river while his father Vasudeva was transporting him across the river. River Yamuna entering Gyan Gudri has its own significance and offering of prayers at this time is believed very auspicious.

It has been widely reported that livelihood of the people was enormously affected due to flood hit; people were facing many problems to adjust themselves with the disrupted environmental conditions. Usually, in the disastrous condition like this, people use some short-term and long-term strategies to cope or adapt to the situation. But, the people, who live on the banks of river Yamuna, explained the flood as the will of God and prayers as the best response. The people expressed their faith in God interpreting the high floods as His way of showing His power and testing their beliefs. It was thought that God Himself had sent the floods, but he also gave the strength to survive them. Thus, this spiritual feeling plays as the best strategy, as it unites the people at the time of disaster and increase co-operation, calmness, peacefulness, positivity and strength among them. Generally, disasters generate panic, negativity and anxiety in people, which in turns multitude the harms of hazardous condition, but in this particular place, Pulin Utsav not only minimizes the negativity, anxiety and panic, instead generates and maximizes calmness, unity and spirituality as a driving force to overcome the troublesome situation which is the first and foremost required condition in disaster management.

Conclusion & Suggestions

It is a very interesting fact, that the celebration of the festival Pulin attracted the researcher, which resulted in the form of present paper. The researcher wants to conclude with the note that if disasters have to be managed successfully, the indigenous cultural and spiritual practices and worldview of the natives must be studied and analysed by the agencies to get a community level co-operation for mitigation and preparedness of any forthcoming event.

Therefore, religion is a key force behind the way the society interacts with vulnerability, as religiosity and belief in disaster as creation of God give them mental strength and make the people prepare to cope with adverse conditions. Thus, the ritual reduces the frequency, scale, intensity and impact of this natural hazard, hence, is strengthening the capacity of communities to withstand, respond and recover.

It can be concluded that the Pulin Utsav at Vrindavan, not only reduces the risk but turns a calamity into an event, a spiritual event!...

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