

## **Serving the Tourists at Emergencies: An Ethnographic Account on Crisis, Communication, Interaction and Hospitality Management in the Face of Disasters**

**Pinaki Dey Mullick<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Arnab Das<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Part Time Teacher (West Bengal Government Approved), Department of Anthropology, Bangabasi College, Kolkata-700009, West Bengal, India; Guest Faculty, Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta, West Bengal, India

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

### **\*Corresponding Author:**

Pinaki Dey Mullick.

**Email:** [p.deymullick@gmail.com](mailto:p.deymullick@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Natural disasters like cyclone now are very frequent worldwide, specially with its hard impacts in coastal regions of India. The state of Orissa having severely exposed to the natural hazard faces a great difficulty multiple times in past few years. The impact of natural disasters not only threatens the life and living of the local people but disrupts and increase vulnerabilities of the tourists who to satisfy their varied interests visits the places of Orissa. The situation became more pathetic who are local people in one hand having the experiences of earlier disaster situation, and have to serve the tourists of different kind at the same time on the other. They are the local hotel service providers who have to serve their guest at the time of natural disaster and to support their family at the same time. In this context, the present ethnography tries to explore the means and the ways of the hotels of Puri, Orissa have resisted the crisis of the disastrous impact of the giant cyclone-*Phailin* on 11<sup>th</sup> October, 2013. The study further aims to understand the process of the management of the hotels and guests houses to serve better and minimize the risks of the tourists in emergencies. The issues of warnings, preparation, communication, interactions and instantly generated mechanisms of the hotel owners and staffs to deal with tourists in a situation under threat are discussed in the present effort to contribute knowledge on the issues of hospitality, support and tourist well being in the face of a disaster.

**Keywords:** disaster, warning, crisis, communication, interaction, hospitality

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The meaning of disasters are seen from the social science perspective (specially in Sociology and Anthropology) as a socially constructed reality that generate the conditions of vulnerability under natural and made disruptive threats and it can be best understood in reference to its social, economic and political contexts[1-6]. Contrastingly, the concept of vulnerability denotes the probability of people's physical exposure to a hazard, their underlying susceptibility or sensitivity to its impacts and their capability to cope with the risk[7-8].

Industries associated with tourism growing rapidly in this century and some of which shows high potentials to be exposed to catastrophe as well [9]. Natural and man-made disasters as a phenomenon may appear in any time and in any region of the globe[10-11]. In contemporary times, the hospitality industries like-hotels are facing an increasing rate of disasters from the natural agents and/or from man-made attempts[12]. Warnings about the detection and possible

impacts of a natural hazard (like-flood, earthquake, cyclone etc.) acts as a social process that involves three basic components- evaluation, dissemination, and response[13-15]. Evaluation is a process of detecting the natural hazard and its impact, and selecting the means to convey the message to the endangered community; whereas disseminations and response means conveying the message and the behaviour of the recipients after receiving the warning respectively[14].

The present research is interested to seek, - what happens when an alert or warning of a natural hazard sounds threatening to the tourists who has come to a place for spirituality, business or for spending holiday?, how the tourists and the hotel service providers faces the crisis?, and how the hotels provide support to their guests to overcome the threat of a disaster?

### **OBJECTIVES**

The present study sets its objective into two broad categories-

1. How the different interests and choices of the tourists are accomplished by the hotel staffs and authorities as the service providers of tourism at the time of emergencies?
2. How these two poles (the tourists and the service providers) communicate among them, generate alternative meanings and stands to a mutually common point to overcome the threat?

## METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on ethnographic approach and methods. The data has been collected through the semi-structured and depth interviews. The owner, managers, and the supporting staffs of almost 25 hotels at Puri (located near the sea beach) were interviewed who has the direct experiences of the cyclone- *Phailin* and managed the tensions and crisis of disaster among the tourists. The cases has been intensively studied and analysed to merge the experiences into the following common themes of discussion. General and common issues of the negative experiences are discussed in the present article with the exact words of the respondents' experiences as the supportive texts and to explain the uniqueness of the thinking and actions of them to serve their guests at emergencies.

## THE FINDINGS

The findings of the research are classified into the following themes for the convenience of a detailed understanding the nature of the event, its warning and preparation, and the crisis of hospitality management during disasters.

### Warning, Risk Prediction and Preparation

The hotel owners and staffs received the strict warning about the cyclone- *Phailin* and its possible devastating impacts from newspapers, television and local administrative agencies approximately 48 hours before the actual event. Bookings were cancelled from the majority of the tourists at the most peak season carrying a huge loss for maximum hotel owners. A sound number of supporting staffs were anxiously waiting to back to their own home and repetitively asked the owner to grant permission. Contrastingly, in some hotels and guest houses the staffs were confident enough to face the disaster and to serve the tourists who still not decided to leave the place rather to face the danger as adventure. Many of tourists from different ages and sexes started to come to Puri just to take pleasure of the cyclone and wished to enjoy the sea in its most dangerous form.

Orissa government initiated emergency alert regarding *Phailin* and disseminated the warning through local television channels and newspapers since four days before the day of the cyclone has stricken down. The local police stations were ordered to be prepared

for emergency relief and all leave applications of the police officials were cancelled. The authorities of the hotels of seaside were instructed to move their guests (tourists) to the other hotels which were estimated to be safe. Following the instructions the staffs of the hotels tried to move their guests to the hotels to which they have a tie up or to move the tourists to the second or third floor of the same hotel. They requested each and every tourist to collect dry food and medicines as soon as possible. The hotel authorities tried to store three basic means to avoid inconvenience of the tourists during the crisis period-food stuffs, water, and fuels for generators. A single guest house owner uniquely decided to accumulate baby food along with candles and first aids.

### The Event

*Phailin* reached to Puri on the evening of 12<sup>th</sup> October 2013 with heavy winds (200-220 km/hr) and rainfall. The electricity was cut out and the scenario of expectation appeared as more dangerous in reality. The sound of the wind and sea became very devastating to the tourists and hotel staffs. Except a few one, most of the networks of the telephone and mobiles got detached. The situation became dreadful. The heavy winds were very fast to store the sea sands to the main road and it took a height of 4 to 5 ft. The main road was blocked due to a thick layer of sand and the communication stopped immediately. The glasses of the windows of the sea facing rooms were smashed and darkness was all around. The physical command of the cyclone continued the whole night and slowed down to the next morning leaving downpour to continue. The trains were cancelled, banking transactions were stopped, ATM counters were not functioning, the main roads were blocked, no electricity was there, telephone networks were detached and finally the tourists were almost trapped to their hotels to the next couple of days until the situation became normal.

### The Crisis, Interaction and Hospitality Management

The choices and preferences of the tourists regarding the facility of a hotel and services from its staffs vary in a wider scale at the phases of crisis and emergencies. The staffs and the authority agencies try to provide their best to fulfil the need and wants of the tourists from humanitarian position and to maintain its reputation even in the time of crisis due to a natural hazard like-cyclone. At this juncture, we have explored multiple layers or dimensions of inconveniences of the tourists and their hotel service providers as well. As the research has been conducted six months latter of the event, it generally misses the perspectives of the tourists who were present at the time of the cyclone and met the crisis. The findings of the present effort is thus a reflection of the experiences of the hotel staffs and the concerned hotel authority who together accomplished the services to their guests, generated alternative means to satisfy the needs of the tourists and provided

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hospitality to support them to overcome the crisis that led them a safe return to their homes. In doing so, the staffs and the authority agencies of the hotels faced great difficulties. We are interested to discuss the issue into the following two sub heads that will unfold the two related grounds of hospitality management at disasters i.e. protecting the tourists from exposure to the natural threat and to unify them to develop collective endeavours to overcome the threat.

### ***The choices of the tourists and associated responses***

At the very day of the cyclone the tourists were afraid when the sound of the wind and thunder became as dominant as blasts. They scared as surrounding became jet black and there were no electricity. A number of curious tourists, who specially stayed or have come to Puri for the cyclone, repetitively asked the managers to open the main door of the hotels so that they can have a view of the sea in a devastating mood from as closer as possible. Some of them even crossed the danger lines that have been warned by Puri police. The staffs of the hotels accompanied the tourists as the situation was dreadful. Mr. M. Biswas, a hotel owner was of opinion that *-we can't leave them alone under threat...the tourists were insisting us to open the main door...finally we did...but we were with them...the police immediately rushed to us and show their temper to me and my staffs...we moved back and requested my guests to return to the hotel rooms...but they hardly attended my request....after the police moved to another side of the beach...the tourists were again to move to the sea beach....it was like a game to the tourists....as they were playing hide and seek...some of the tourists even were in a drunken state...I felt angry...but did not lose my nerve...it was difficult to me to convince them but easier from to leave them alone.* The situation was tough to them who were still serving their guests who willingly appeared as vulnerably exposed to the threat.

The situations among a few staffs of the hotel became more critical. Mr. S. K. Das, a hotel boy from Jhargram, West Bengal residing at Puri for his job, replied- *my contacts with my wife and daughter detached at 6.30 p.m. at evening on 12<sup>th</sup> October...I could not make them call as there were no network....when I talked to my wife for the last time before the network has dropped down...she was in a deep tension as she was watching TV about the cyclone at Orissa...my daughter was at the coaching centre..I did not able to talk to her....I was depressed and felt a question- can I expect to see them again? at that time a middle aged women (our guest) came to me and told me to arrange some amount of boil water for her grandson who have to fed milk...I was about to react...but suddenly I felt how she would know about my situation?...silently I moved from the place to arrange boil water from kitchen...at my way towards kitchen...a young fellow stopped me and asked- "can u arrange some snacks and soft drinks for our friend party tonight*

*at our rooms? Do not worry...I will pay u the extra for the effort"...I was stunned and politely assured him that- "I will try"....after all they were our guests.*

The choices and expectations of the tourists vary in a wider scale even in the time of a crisis, as appeared from the version of Mr. J. Mahato, a co-owner of a hotel- *....I was getting confused...some of the tourists came to me to know how long the cyclone will continue...some of them was asking me to permit them to go to the beach...a few were complaining about the generator (as we have a single generator and that was exhausted...so we stopped it for just 45 minutes)....my frustration was almost out of control when a tourist came to me and requested me to change the night lamp as it was not working....I had lost my nerve immediately and furiously rejected his request....the tourists will never understand our positions...they just want to promote their 'consumer rights'.*

The tourists express their demands even in the phase of a crisis as they are in 'normal' situations. When the cyclone was over but its impact was a living force then the situation led a new turn. The roads were blocked due to heavy sand layers the tourists felt them as trapped to their hotel rooms. They had no way to move to the sea beach or to the Jagannath temple. They were bored and frequently asked to the hotel staffs a few common questions-when the electricity will be available?, when the telephone networks will be normal?, and how long the roads will be blocked? Mr. Mahapatra, a local hotel owner said- *the tourists became restless to ask again and again about electricity, phone network, train availability and so on....we permitted them to use our land line to communicate in free of coast...after all we can't deny our responsibility and humanitarian ground...but we were irritated by repetitively asked same questions..being irritated we left the hotels for 30 minutes-45 minutes outside to relax and came back again to start the generator...or to provide answers for their quarry...after a day..the electricity and telephone network became normal...the complain were minimized.* The most significant issue is that after getting a facility in a normal mode the tourists claimed an associated facility which might not available for the time being. Mr. J. Mahato was of opinion that-*after the electricity was normal a guest of us came to me and complained that the cable line was not working and they had no other option except watching TV....just think the situation! I was silent for a while and tried to convince him about the situation...I told him "the cable line will start shortly..the repairing is under process.." I knew that I am telling him lie..but I had nothing to do...I had to stop him to complain..but to provoke him to wait.* The management and service of a hotel became challenged when a threat from natural environment creates alteration to the lived situations and expectations. No

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prior planning works as fit and claims an alternative strategy and instant scheme to deal with the situations.

#### **Issues of unity, cooperation and interaction under threat**

Providing services to the tourists at the time of emergencies really became horrendous to the hotel staffs. Not all the tourists think for their own sake and choices as opined by Mr. K. Pattanayak, a local hotel owner- *our guests were very cooperative to us...that night my family members insisted me so many times to come back home...I denied...felt that my guests are in a trouble...so I must stay with them....we together with my staffs and guests (around 55 in number) assembled to the hall of my hotel...interacted each others in a relaxing mood...it was a family feeling ! you know..we had dinner together...kichuri (hoch-poch) a local dish was prepared for all..the night blended us together...as I know our guests from my childhood..they too...I really felt that...when the crisis became over they (the guests) were about to return their home....I felt very touchy...I did not know that they will return again or not...I know that they are just our customers...but still...that night.. I remember I felt the taste of a family with the unknown.*

The attachment of the hotel staffs and managers to the tourists in an emergency situation is very important for hospitality management or providing them support and brings them together under threat. Developing unity, togetherness and solidarity among the tourists who are generally unknown to each other is one of the key concern of the service providers of the hotel industries at emergencies that may minimize the complain and tensions among the tourists and help to develop effective cooperation among them.

#### **Myth and spirituality as support building system**

The local people including the hotel owners have had a strong belief on the lord Jaggannath. One among the receptionists of a locally popular guest houses at Puri looked confident when saying that- *since there is lord Jagganath in the temple then we do not have anything to worry about...he is the ultimate to protect us from the all evil.* The local myth and spirituality helps the service providers to hold their nerve at emergencies. They also try to support their anxious guests in reference to the local spiritual ideology. One of the hotel owners pronounced a statement from a local myth - '*Baishe pahaje mino akheriko*'; that means- the day when the water level of the sea will reach to the 22<sup>nd</sup> step of the temple and the fishes will play on the staircase, the day will be the end of the world. The statement clearly indicates that the hotel service providers have a strong faith to the lord Jagganath that help them to minimize the impact of a hazard like-cyclone psychologically. They provide support to the tourists with this spiritual mode of behaviour. The local people also believe that the sea is the residence of the in-laws of lord Jagganath. Mr. S. Pattanayak in this context, mentioned that-*when I saw a*

*child of a family among my guests was very afraid to see the heavy waves of the sea...I called him close to me and told him the story of marriage of the great god lord Jagganath with the daughter of the sea....since then the sea is expressing its anger to the lord with the sound and waves...so don't worry...God will save us.* The centrality of Jagganath in every mode of actions in the life and living of the people of Puri acts as a positive mean to resist psychologically from the evil even in case of a giant and devastating cyclone- *Phailin*.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The endeavour tries to portray the situations of hardship of the hotel service providers as the hospitality industries at the face of a natural disaster. The attempt contextualizes its aim in reference to the owners, managers, caretakers, and other service providers of the hotels and guest houses near Puri sea beach, who directly handle the tourists in emergencies.

Findings reflect that the situation became dreadful to the hotel service providers at emergency situations followed by natural disasters. Puri is one of the most disaster prone zone of Orissa and at the same time one of the most popular tourist place in India. The interests and purpose of the tourists to visit Puri vary in a wider scale and so multiply vary their needs and demands from the hospitality industries like-hotels during their visit. The hotel staffs have to face a great difficulty to maintain the varied interests of the tourists in the regular course of their profession, as it is said that there is no off season in case of tourism at Puri. The hotel staffs are habituated to deal with such a situation and are very efficient to generate instant means to solve the immediate issues in context. The new comers as the service providers specially the room attaining boys have to learn quickly by observing the other experienced staffs who are allotted the same duties. There is neither any special training for the staffs within the hotels, nor the selection criteria of the hotel staffs generally required any hotel management degree or training specially in case of the staffs who directly interacts to the tourist daily. The selection of room attaining staffs depends on the personal relations of other staffs who are performing their duties at the concerned hotels since long time. Generally the owner (local or not), managers and other hotel staffs pushes their own relatives or known ones to the hotels to provide service.

Lack of specialized knowledge may run accurately at the situation that we may term as 'normal', but became vulnerable at emergencies like-disasters. The management of the hotels became challenged at the face of a rapid changing situation after having received the warnings of a cyclone which is about to hit within few hours of the time of announcement. Some of the tourists are in a hurry with anxiety to depart the place immediately, some became excited to enjoy the

cyclone, some became panic to store their personal food, some are asking repetitive queries about the possible inconveniences, and a sound number of tourists are checking in to hotels to take pleasure of the cyclone. The situation became confusing to the hotel service providers. What to take as the priorities became the most significant question to them having almost no answer. After receiving the warning of a natural hazard the pre disaster preparation became significant. The prime focus is given on generators, food and water materially and to warn the tourists about the possible impacts of the hazard like-cyclone. The situation is more pathetic when the hazard is its highest mode and each and every communication with outer world became stopped. The staffs of the hotels have to meet every guest of their hotel to provide support and to restrict the guests who being over excited trying to move outside the hotel. When the deadly time is over, the hotel service providers have to arrange almost all for the safe return of their guests to their residence. The state of Orissa is undergoing severe cyclones frequently in past few years. Damages are constant to the several districts of Orissa; some of them are the significant place for tourism. In this context, special care should be given on the disaster management training to the service providers of the hotels and other hospitality industries, who are directly holds the responsibilities of their guests during visit. The present case tries to put a hint on this issue for better policy and action.

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