

Kutch and Aceh Recoveries: A View

The past few decades have witnessed a steady rise in environmental disasters. At the launch of the 2015 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction (GAR15), the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warned that the exposure to natural hazards combined with growing global inequality, urbanization and overconsumption of energy and natural resources "threaten to drive risk to dangerous and unpredictable levels with systemic global impacts" (UNISDR, 2015). A comparative research of 141 countries between 1981 and 2002 highlighted this urgency, but added gendered dimension to the analysis. Based on this comparative study, disasters disadvantage women in three ways: disasters kill more women than men; disasters have higher impact in lowering the post-disaster life expectancy of women; and socioeconomic status has a major role in weakening the gender gap in life expectancy (Neumayer and Plümper 2007). Urbanization poses specific gendered challenges. Post-disaster recovery, reconstruction and long-term development should be guided by such concerns, aiming to reducing vulnerability to gendered violence and discrimination.

Over the past decade I have conducted ethnographic research in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean earthquake and the tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia and more specifically in the provincial capital of Banda Aceh. Following the lives of Banda Acehnese through their everyday experiences offers insights into the relations of power and the potential structures of violence that are embedded in the aftermath: layered



exiles and displacement; hidden narratives of violence and grief; struggles over gendered expectations of being a good and respectable woman and man; the hierarchical political economy of post-conflict and tsunami reconstruction; and multiple ways of arranging lives and remembrance, cherishing loved ones and forming caring and loving relationships outside the normative notions of nuclear family and home. Aceh, due to three decades of armed conflict, is still in economic terms, a periphery of Indonesia's economic development. Post-disaster governance has not been successful for maintaining the economic activities of the reconstruction period, nor addresses the question of structural poverty (22% compared with overall 15% in Indonesia, based on 2012 statistics) and social inequalities.

When comparing the district of Kutch in Gujarat that is recovering from the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in 2001 with the province of Aceh, somewhat similar

phenomena of "post-disaster provinciality" seems to exist. Gujarat is well-known for its two decades of high growth economically, which has trickled down to industrialisation, increased migration and urbanization, including that of the semi-rural town of Bhuj. When I visited Bhuj briefly in October 2016 I was told that the number slums in town had doubled since the pre-earthquake days and the Planning Commissions estimate for 2011-12 for people living below poverty line in Gujarat was at 21, 5% - that of Kutch district potentially even higher than the rest of the state. In my forthcoming research I aim to understand how does gender intersect with post-disaster urbanization, urban planning and in Bhuj, approaching questions of resilience and recovery through ethnographic and life-historical methods. ■

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