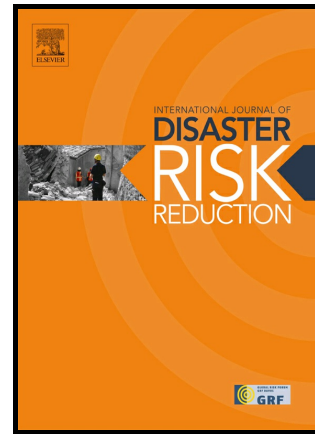


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Understanding historical, cultural and religious frameworks of mountain communities and disasters in Nubra valley of Ladakh

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Kavita Suri

ABSTRACT

Ladakh, a high altitude cold desert in India inhabited by various ethnic communities, has become quite vulnerable to environmental hazards like flash-floods, cloudbursts, snowstorms, landslides etc. This landscape which has been traditionally dominated by Buddhist and Muslim communities, has witnessed much devastation in the 2010, 2012 and 2015 flash-floods and cloudbursts which resulted in a big loss of human lives besides massive infrastructural damages.

The present paper seeks to study the impact of religion, culture, customs and rituals of this small Himalayan Ladakhi society in directly or indirectly influencing disaster response and recovery mechanisms. It would also explore the impact of behavior, perceptions and responses of Ladakhi communities in times of disasters. The paper seeks to understand not only the cultural framings in the times of disasters but also its socio-cultural settings, inter-community relations, government's role that can influence risk reduction, disaster's Impact on livelihood and cultural survival.

Keywords: Environmental hazards, conflict zones, cross-border links, disasters, disaster response, disaster preparedness

INTRODUCTION

Ladakh, a high altitude cold desert located in Indian Himalayas is a deeply religious and cultural society with two major communities – Buddhists and Muslims – dominating the landscapes since ages. Of the two districts of Ladakh region – Leh and Kargil- Leh is dominated by Buddhist community while Kargil has a majority of Muslims most of whom profess Shia faith of Islam. In these past two decades, these communities have witnessed increased environmental hazards like cloudbursts, landslides, flash floods etc. which have also led to a serious threat to the existence of traditional and cultural livelihoods of the people of the region. In fact, a reoccurrence of natural disasters like flash-floods and cloudbursts almost every alternate year is threatening the very existence of the Ladakhi society.

In such a society, it is important to explore the role of culture, religion, religious preachers and religious associations in disaster management and issues of adaptation etc in disaster situations and recovery processes. It is equally important to understand whether any disaster risk reduction processes are ingrained in their Ladakhi culture or not and how resilient these cultures are. Each religion is embedded in regional culture. In other words, religion is a vital factor of local culture. Influenced by culture, each religion views disasters by interconnecting with tradition and modernity to include its traditional rituals and ethics. Culture and Religion has an influence on interpreting disasters too. For example, when an earthquake struck Central Java and Yogyakarta Java provinces of Indonesia in May 2006 causing massive displacement of people, the community perceived it as the will of God and punishment for rapid modernization. Besides, they also believed that earthquake reflected the moral and cultural crisis caused by modernization.

The importance of culture towards disasters was particularly highlighted during the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 when some communities with indigenous knowledge regarding Tsunami were successfully survived where as migrants and tourists who did not had local

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