RECONSTRUCTING ‘FAITH’ AS A SOCIAL CAPITAL AT THE DISASTER PRONE COASTAL COMMUNITIES IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

Culture- being observed as an essential intangible feature of a community, has recently been incorporated in the Disaster Risk Reduction initiatives in the field of Disaster Management. Religion - which is often interpreted as an integral part of a marginal community’s identity has yet to be comprehended in the formal disaster management platforms. For decades, the term ‘faith’ served as a sort of conceptual scaffolding at the theological premise when it comes in the discussion regarding the belief system, ideological doctrine and optimism. The primordial interpretation of disaster was always been associated with the belief system of a community, and often it shaped the social identity of the settlements at the disaster-prone locations. It is often regarded by the scientific community that religious narratives misinterpret ‘disaster’ with ignorance, superstition and backwardness. But often, members of an affected community exhibit cognitive, behavioral and psychosomatic effects as an aftermath of natural disaster, where ‘faith’ can play a vital role in the recovery process during and after the calamities. Though the coastal communities are economically active, socially dynamic, and physically mutating, the advent of disasters has always caused havoc in the community’s properties. The critical role of religious faith in the small communities at the disaster-prone areas has often been uninvestigated and this paper explores it as ‘social capital’ and reimagines to give an architectural interpretation to incorporate adequately in the disaster management system.

Introduction

Religion has a significant effect at the time of disaster, especially in Bangladesh where it plays an important role of the people in the marginal communities in their daily activities. It may influence the believer of the community both on preparedness before the fatality and the management at post-disaster crisis. Although the topic of religion is being new to be considered at the system of disaster management, some scholars have started focusing on the role of religion in terms of disaster management or disaster risk reduction internationally. However, it can be stated that there has not been any systematic research conducted to examine the role of religion in disaster management and reduction system and there is a gap in design research to metamodel the architectural interpretation of the faith-based institutions at the communities prone to disaster. This paper aims to bridge the gap between these two subdivisions. By analyzing the existing studies, the paper investigates the scope of Islam and Hinduism - the two major religion to be operated according to community-oriented management approaches. The theological premises from the scriptures have been analyzed and discussed to emphasize the potential policy measures.

It can be said that the impact of faith can rectify the social crisis and faith-based institutions can contribute physically in the management of the aftermath of the disasters. Many of the disasters like Aila or Sidr are still having repercussions across a range of institutions and the communities. The discussion of this paper begins with analyzing the scope of social capital and would argue whether faith could create a space-place dialectic to augment communities’ resilience through religious institutions by fostering social trust, construct refuge and empower community members. The second section develops a framework for an attempt to metamodel the institutions with architectural interpretation, followed by a description of investigation for design research and its prospect.

Religious Faith as Social Capital

According to (Bowles, 2002), social capital rests, among other things, on the trust, trustworthiness, and altruism between individuals, and on self-enforcing norms of behavior, all of which allow trades between two agents to be completed informally, with lower transactions costs than required by complex contracts. According to Louis Hanifan, Social capital can be elaborated as social goodwill, fellowship and mutual
sympathy among a group of individuals who make a social unit. (Portes, 1998) suggested that the concept being adopted to multiple disciplines based on the involvement and participation of the groups in impacting positive consequences for the individual and communities. It can be stated that social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition (Bourdieu, 1985). This definition from Bourdieu focuses on the resources that are being generated by the interaction of the members of social networks. Although inextricably linked with economic capital, social capital cannot be reduced simply to economic form. (Putnam, 2000) in his book ‘Bowling Alone’ described that the role of social capital in generating the benefits beyond individuals at the community level. He defined social capital as networks, trust and norms which facilitate actions and cooperation for mutual benefit and as a feature of social organizations. The National Social Capital Benchmark Community Survey from Harvard University (2000, 2006) assesses social capital through the individual’s senses of belonging in community and groups, memberships and their activities in religious, social, recreational activities and even the frequency of visiting with neighbors and friends. (Cardenas, 2008) assesses the social capital through laboratory experiments whereas (Levitt, 2008) has undertaken the experiments out in the field with the advantages of natural conditions or at randomized control trials.

(Baum, 2000) stated, though the economic, social and physical characteristics of a community may affect the level of social capital of it, the community itself is considered as central to the social capital. Hence, religious views and norms, being an integral part of the community’s sense which offers the belongingness at the community and members construct commitments for the members to be together. The social networks in the community, participation in both voluntary and involuntary forms, trust, reciprocity and social inclusion can be governed by religious thoughts, ideas, norms and belief.

The religious faith plays a positive role by encouraging individuals and communities to behave morally. Hence the religious philosophy has the potentiality as counseling in various phases in the crisis response. By providing refuge to get shelter in the religious centers and by engaging with the recovery phase with the direction from the religious leaders, religious faith can constructively contribute to enhancing social capital of a community.

**Theological Interpretation of Disaster at the Marginal Communities**

Beside the scientific explanations, a great variety of ideas and interpretations of the reason for the disaster coexists in the affected communities. The symbolic and religious interpretations are highly important in the aftermath of a disaster to recognize and facilitate the community’s recovery process. (Schlehe, 2010) explained that modern values, consumerisms, moral decay, corruption and individualism, human intervention in the natural ecosystem are often regarded as ‘ill of modernity’ sometimes seems like a threat to the religious culture and heritage values of the communities living in marginal areas. In her article of Anthropology of religion: Disasters and the representations of tradition and modernity, it is believed by the people of the affected communities from the Javanese island on Indonesia after the advent of major earthquakes before 2010 that disasters have revealed cultural and moral crises which are related to modernization. The relation of the quacks to other socio-political factors was also interpreted by the communities. Her interview with the representatives of the two of the largest Islamic organizations demonstrated two different opinions. The traditionalist school inferred the disaster with the evidence of unwillingness inability of the ruling government to conserve the tradition and culture. The other school alleged the disaster being linked with mixing Islam with local mythological spirits (Schlehe, 2010).

(Chester, 2005) in his work referred that the deities symbolize and invoked as the causal agent of death and destruction. Although the responses vary from the place, culture, religious traditions etc. The research and study of geomythology demonstrate the supernatural interpretations of the disaster believed in the communities although the view is changed later as the conventional wisdom marks it with superstitions and backwardness.

The events of disasters are omnipresent in the tradition of both the practicing monotheist and polytheist religion among the communities. The unexpected, uncertain and unscheduled form of disasters is somewhat linked with the traditional faith which resembles the impacts of moral decay and materialism to a certain extent. Rather than viewing as a rare and extreme phenomenon (Hewitt, 1997) and (Maskrey, 1989) viewed it as an amplifier of daily hardship and emergency. They recommended to undertake the non-engineering measures as poverty reduction, fare access to land and resources, better services etc. and emphasizes
community-based disaster risk reduction. (Schipper, 377-393) in his studies demonstrated the theological aspect of belief system in the context of minimizing the disaster hazard and climate change induced risks. Although (Meril, 2010) emphasized on the power of nature as a consequence of human failure, (Paradise, 2005) explained the disaster as a form of divine action and retribution from Islamic perspective.

Islam, one of the largest monotheistic religion being widely practiced in Bangladesh, the interpretation of disaster in this religion is a form of collective punishment, divine action and retribution. (Adisaputri, 2016) stated in her study that the ‘sura’ or verses of the Holy Scripture ‘Qur’an’ the concept is widely elaborated as -earthquake (Al-A’raf:91, Al-Ankabut: 37), flooding (Al-Ankabut:14, Saba’:6), typhoon (Al-Haqqah:6), drought (Al-A’raf:30). The idea of Qaeda and Qadr is associated with Islam as the event of disaster being written as fate and almost unchangeable unless the will of almighty. Islamic theology foregrounds the concept of the peaceful life and the reconstruction from a socially organized manner. Also the constructive voluntary works and the notion of devotional labor at the time of crisis are interpreted as the act of worshipping God in the religion of Hinduism and providing the hand on relief in crisis stimulate and enhance the devotional sense of the community.

Scope of the Faith Based Institutions in DRR Practices

David K. Chester, Angus M. Duncan, and Christopher J. L. Dibben in their work reflect upon that disaster response are not independent of religion and cultural practices of a community (Chester D. K., 2008). (Schlehe, 2010) in her writings stipulated the impact of disaster associated with the traditional culture and religious belief system and showed how to shape, interpret and negotiate disaster impact. With proper coordination, the religious institutions can be the part of the process in the management techniques used in the field of disaster management as emergency operation planning, hazard identification, leadership, decision-making, emergency information distribution, communication management, personnel evaluation, risk analysis, coordination strategies among multiple stakeholders (Ha, 2016). Although not being coordinated in a strategic manner, the global practices envoke the religious institutions and the preachers to deliver sermons regarding disaster scripted from the traditional religious accounts.

Crisis moments can bring out many acts of compassion and generosity where faith based institutions can outplay a major role. Extensive emergency relief campaigns can be formed by mobilizing gratitude through the networks of religious institutions. The individuals who have faith upon religion has an impact on her social health, mental health and has the scope in developing mental rehabilitation. As (Chester, 2005) identified and examined the successful response of local culture as a key role playing in the disaster-affected community, the implication of the cultural institution should be a part of the process in the local emergency planning as well. The problem that can be seen from the recent events of the disasters that the inadequacy of the government responses to the need of the fatalities, the widespread crisis of food and shortage of health facilities. Voluntary engagement from different social organizations with a range of activities like relief works, cleanup operations are one part of the crisis management but sometimes for not being part of the systematical management process, is unorganized. The government’s effort to restore the disaster affected settlement

Religious institutions can nurture a large social vision and mobilize the members for various forms of social (and to some extent secular) engagements. Through its elaborate and systematic operations, more coordinated and effective response to the crisis of natural disasters especially like cyclones can be settled. As in Bangladesh, almost 85 percent of the people live in rural areas (Dasgupta, 2010) and the religious institutions as mosques and temples act as the center of the social activities in these settlements (Hossain, 2016). Showed that religion plays an important role in the life of Bangladeshi people to acquire strength and cope with disasters.

Architectural Interpretation: Design Research

The religious institution’s headquarters are mostly intended to ascertaining the condition of its branches after the major disasters and limited its involvement in donating money and calling for fundraisers. Its role can be expanded to encompass responses to the disaster by offering aid to nonmembers too. The design of the institutions has the scope of removal of debris through the volunteer activities, distribution of pure drinking water and saline packets, dried meals and material aid.

The idea of rethinking and reimagining the religious institutions was the primary concern of the design studio.
project of the second year student’s of Department of Architecture, Sonargaon University of Summer 2018 semester, where they have given an actual site in Moheshkhali to interact with the community people to learn their needs and demands. Later they were engaged to analyze the possible cyclone shelter formation considering the religious practices of the community maintaining the guidelines of CBDM approaches. Here, the idea was not only to engage the local community to become part of creating plans and decisions but also to engage them in the process of implementation.

Figure 1. The schematic design layout of reimagining mosques as cyclone shelter by the students.

Figure 2. Master plan and details of the mosque reimagined as a community development and cyclone shelter.

The primary guidelines for the reimagined shelters as installing toilets on the raised ground, raised water sources, food and medicine preservations, and community based initiatives empowerment strategy have been followed by the standards from previous design research (Hossain, 2016). As the religious places are communal meeting and decision making space, the scope of creating a space-place dialect by incorporating the possibilities from the religious perspective with the notion of empowering the community for a holistic secure-livelihood approach to enhance sustainability was the design criteria. Also as learning from the previous study (Hossain, 2016) to perform disaster awareness, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery through the mosques and temples with the transparency of activities and dissemination of knowledge and information to encourage people's participation in activities was practiced in the studio.
Conclusion

Religious institutions have the potential to involve the community people to the disaster management system by fostering trust and thus enhancing social capital. Mosques or temples in the remote settlements can empower the voluntary sector by nurturing grassroots energy. Not only by involving people in the recovery and restoration process as a form of compassion and generosity, but the fundamental social change can also be possible by incorporating these institutions in the DRR system with proper training and evaluation. Through its elaborate and systematic operations, more coordinated and effective response to the crisis of natural disasters especially like cyclones can be settled.

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References


