

# Disaster and Disability in Bangladesh: A Contemporary Review

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## BACKGROUND

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Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, the population density according to 2004 figures stood at 790 per sq km. This figure is the highest in world excluding city-states like Singapore and Hong Kong. The population of Bangladesh in July 2004 was estimated to be over 141 million. Growing at the present rate of 2.08% percent per annum, there will be a net increase of 50.14 Million by the year 2020.

Alongside, Bangladesh is one of the most disaster prone countries of the world. It is situated in the world's hazard belts and is subject to natural disasters like floods, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes, windstorms, and tidal waves. The major natural disasters that occur periodically in this region are largely due to climatic and seismic factors.

This alarming increase in population size and regular consistent occurrence of natural disasters is obviously having a major impact on the relative size of person with disabilities (PWDs) in the country. In Bangladesh, person with disabilities constitute a total of the One hundred Fifty Million. This is approximately 10% of the total population. Amongst them approximately 2 million people are visually challenged. This number is not static and is growing each year. Alarming, specialised disaster related services for this segment of the population are no-way near the demand.

The paper attempts to cover some of the factors and concerns related to disaster and disability in Bangladesh under the current socio-economic settings.

## DISASTER AND DISABILITY IN BANGLADESH

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### Some Major Issues:

The issues of disaster and disability in Bangladesh are manifold. However, the major and common ones are more or less similar with the rest of the world. Typically the disaster period can be divided into three major phases. These include - a) Pre Disaster Period b) During Disaster Period and c) Post Disaster Period. PWDs are the worst sufferers in each of these phases.

At pre disaster phase the major issues include - access to information (timely and in accessible format) and accessibility to shelter. While PWDs with hearing impairment and intellectual disability can't access the mass media information services, they often depend on others to act on their behalf. In general, every single of them suffer with accessibility problems to the emergency shelter in particular, the cyclone shelters. All around Bangladesh, government have contracted and built thousands of cyclone shelters with huge amount of foreign aid. Unfortunately, both the government and the foreign donors have managed to completely forget about the PWDs while using the fund and building the shelters. Not a single one of them have ramps or any other accessibility features. Even the stairs are high and risky. Moreover, volunteers and community people at large hardly have any knowledge or skill about how to assist person with disabilities. This poses a greater constraint for the pre disaster preparedness of PWDs.

During disaster phase the major problems are the absence of special care facilities required for the PWDs. The huge gap of awareness about disability and the person with disabilities in general among the population often results in

### Case Study 01:

Gour Chandra Basak's family was quite solvent before the 1989 tornado. But now, the family is hard-pressed. Very often Basak gets into debt for survival.

Before the storm, he had a big shop in the Sauria Bazar. It was a busy shop but the cyclone destroyed it completely. He took credit from Mahajons (money lenders) to erect the shop. But it is not going well. He also supports the educational expenses of his kids out of this modest income. Three family members were physically affected by the tornado. Besides himself, his wife and son were seriously injured. A long piece of bamboo penetrated deep into his son's body. His belly now looks like a boat and he is virtually immobilised.

The medical assistance given to them was quite adequate. But they needed capital to restart the business. They needed to be economically rehabilitated as well. They needed institutional credit, which was not forthcoming.

Gour Chandra Basak, aged 52.

mistreatment and negative attitude. General superstitions like the PWDs are cursed by god and they bring bad luck often result in unsupportive behaviour towards them. Moreover, the absence of knowledge among community in general on how to assist the PWDs once again becomes a barrier to support and assist them during the disaster period.

The often chaotic post disaster phase becomes a major challenge for the PWDs to access relief and rehabilitation facilities. They struggle hard to compete with the physically able people and in every case lag behind them. Materials like assistive device which are a necessity to the PWDs loose their priority in front of other post disaster priorities and thus become secondary issue in relief and rehabilitation.

#### **Government Interventions on Disaster and Disability:**

Hardly any government initiative can be found in Bangladesh to address the person with disabilities at the pre and during disaster period. Similarly the post disaster rehabilitation initiatives are also generalised and do not offer any special assistance for the PWDs.

#### **NGO Interventions on Disaster and Disability:**

Tsunami have not made a big impact on Bangladesh. It was hardly noticed in the media. However, after Asian Tsunami few NGO are taking some initiative to introduce the issues. In mainstream Disaster preparedness the NGO have a very good rule but Disability issues is not very consider specially.

#### **Case Study 02:**

Life is indeed a mini war. Here, you can't be defeated. Defeat means an end of it. You must be a winner.

The tornado of 1987 came as a curse on our life. Most of the rich families have been destroyed. Some people have been disabled. Some have lost beloved family members. I have lost one of my legs.

After the loss of my leg, I became hopeless. I was not sure if I could do anything to make ends meet. After talking to my elder brother, I decided to start a grocery shop near my house. I can now easily manage my life as a shopkeeper. Now hopes are coming back into my mind. Even though I am a disabled man, I can still contribute something to my family.

After the tornado, a large number of government and non-government organisations (NGOs) carried out relief and rescue operations. They provided food and medical facilities. Some of them also had rehabilitation programmes for the poor.

The tornado came as a big shock to all of us. We had no food and most of our family members were injured. Had there been no rescue operation, first aid, supply of food and other essential materials, it would have been impossible for us to survive. We got enough food from government and non-governmental organisations. If the government or an NGO could provide us with some credit, for organising income-generating activities, it would have been much better for us.

When I now recall, I saw a ball of fire approaching me immediately before the storm. I was in my courtyard. A sudden strong wind blew me into a farm near my house. I became unconscious almost immediately. After a while, I was rescued and sent to the nearest hospital. I spent about one month there. They treated me with sympathy and care. After all these experiences, I am not afraid of life's struggle. But I need some material assistance to start my life again.

**A. Barek, aged 32**

## POSSIBILITIES FOR BANGLADESH:

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In spite of the current dark scenario it is not all bad news for the

### Technological Possibilities:

Sahana ('relief' in Sinhalese), a disaster relief management system built following the recent Asian tsunami. Sinhala GNU/Linux desktop, Kandula (for WS Atomics transactions), Grappix (a live CD optimizer for 2D and 3D graphics), Sandesha (web services reliable messaging implementation). Sahana Disaster Relief Project is a simple IT solution can help the relief, recovery and rehabilitation work. Natural alignment of disaster management domain problems to FOSS. It is not a theoretical exercise; it's driven by real needs and realities. Feedback from those experienced with disaster management and others has been very positive. Components so far include: organization registry, people registry, request management system, camp registry and burial registry. Long term objective is to become a free, open source disaster preparation, relief and recovery management system. Sahana is an FOSS project in SourceForge. See <http://www.sahana.lk/> for OS project and <http://relief.cno.gov.lk/> for live system.

Community radio which has recently become legal in India can also prove to be a cheap and accessible local information system for the PWDs. It's features like wide community participation and user friendly and simple operational style allows everyone to take part in it equally. However, as the term community can widely versatile, it can also mean a radio by, for and with the person with disabilities which will serve their special information requirements and create mass awareness on disability and disaster related issues. This kind of model can prove extremely useful in poor and limited resource countries like Bangladesh.

Recently standard like Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY) have been introduced in Bangladesh as well. With a focal point established at Chittagong City under Chittagong District of Bangladesh and through the nationwide network it is serving the visually challenged people with digital talking books on disaster information and preparedness.

### Social Possibilities:

In recent days disability and disaster issues are getting more response and importance than before. With the ongoing movements by the civil society and non government organisations person with disabilities are becoming more organised and mobilized around the issues of their own concern. The PWDs are forming their own self help groups and institutions. It can be expected that the current development players with their renewed strategies and PWD leaders, the initiatives will gather required momentum shortly.

## LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

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The above study is mainly based on various national & international sources of data including publications, websites & other mass medias. Aside from this there was little scope to accommodate all the information within this limited paper. Therefore much of the data could not be presented here. Especially in the sections where interventions by different NGOs of Bangladesh have been briefed, information about many NGOs & their interventions might have been missing. Moreover, some organisations might have stopped some of the interventions in the described areas in the meanwhile. So this study should be considered as a limited overview on the themes presented here.

## CONCLUSION

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Review of the overall situation clearly implies that the services & interventions by both Government and Non Government entities for & with the person with disabilities is quite limited. Moreover, in most cases the programs for the PWDs are limited within stereotype activities. Often it is seen that organisations conduct many activities only because they are described in project documents or asked by donor agencies; not with a clear, specific long-term vision for the advancement of the youth population. More stress should to be given on strategic direction & management of disaster and disability related interventions in Bangladesh. Another limitation of the general activities for PWDs in Bangladesh is that it lacks a holistic approach. There is hardly any focus on integrating different stakeholders, populations and generations which often creates a gap among these segments of the population and the development players. Yet the scenario can be improved if more support from the Government & International organisations can be ensured.

### PROFILE

Mr. Vashkar Bhattacharjee is presently working as the Programme Officer of Young Power in Social Action (YPSA) a non-government social development organization working since 1985(UN International Youth Year) up till now. He is MA in Social History from Chittagong University & completed his Dusking fellowship from Japan in 2002. He is also currently working as the DAISY Focal Person of Bangladesh and convener National ICT Thematic Group for PWD's. He has been engaged with various development activities, research and networking at National & International area.

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