

## A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF LIVED EXPERIENCES OF 2022 FLOOD SURVIVORS IN RAJAN PUR DISTRICT-SOUTH PUNJAB-PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*In August 2022, many parts of Pakistan were devastated by an unprecedented flood. The flooding caused a heavy loss to physical infrastructure and forced a massive evacuation. This preliminary phenomenological study was conducted to gain an understanding of meanings of this traumatic experience. The participants were asked to share the meanings of their experiences with regard to flood preparedness, evacuation, sheltering and recovery. Data were collected by field visits, observation and conducting in-depth interviews. Convenient sampling technique was adopted to reach the participants. Data analysis uncovered five essential themes making the essence of the flood experiences. These are (1) confusion and undecidedness (2) chaos and selfishness (3) shame and guilt (4) shock and disbelief (5) hopefulness and expectations. The findings of the study reflect how the meanings of traumatic experience can shape important decisions such as evacuations, asking for help, sheltering and prospects of rehabilitation and recovery.*

**Key words:** Phenomenology, Flood, disaster, experiences, South Punjab

### INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, Pakistan has experienced two major catastrophic floods in 2010, 2014 and many small scale floods. After twelve years, now in August 2022, the country has faced one of the worst floods in its history. According to Reliefweb (2022), the catastrophic 2022 floods have destroyed 556,000 houses, 1.17 million houses have been damaged, 67000 km roads damaged, 1400 people lost their lives and 12,700 injured. Overall 33 million people have been hit by worst floods. Floods forced 800,000 people to move to relief camps while million were staying with host communities. The area affected by flood disaster is bigger than United Kingdom. The assessment estimates total damages to exceed USD 14.9 billion, and total economic losses to reach about USD 15.2 billion. Estimated needs for rehabilitation and reconstruction in a resilient way are at least USD 16.3 billion (World Bank, 2022).

The catastrophic 2022 flood severely affected Rajan Pur and Dera Ghazi Districts of South Punjab as well. At least 0.30 million people have been affected in these two districts, 60 people died and more than 400 houses were completely or partially damaged. The floods caused heavy damage to built infrastructure such as schools, health facilities, veterinary hospitals, electricity installation, internet facilities, roads, bridges and railways lines. Almost 0.20 million acres of crops were severely affected by the floods (Mubeen, 2022). Besides this, the floods caused irreparable losses to business centers such as small retail shops, warehouses, poultry sheds and dairy houses and displaced hundred thousands of people, leading to a “secondary disaster” (Alexander, 2018).

Disasters are defined as catastrophic events that transcend the coping and managing capacity of human being. The sudden onset of flood disaster left people in pain and misery. The sudden onset of disasters lead to “psychic trauma” (Erikson, 1976) and needing for “psychic impairments” (Erikson, Lifton & Olson, 1976). Accordingly, disasters like flood entail long term physical, emotional and psychological repercussions for the survivors. Psychological conditions include anxiety, depression, sleeplessness, stress and suicidal ideation and posttraumatic stress disorder. Physiological impacts include injury, threat to life, malnutrition, cardiac arrests and worsening chronic disease (Assanangkornchai, Tangboonngam, & Edwards, 2004; Mason, Andrews & Upton, 2010; Lamond, Joseph, & Proverbs, 2015; Zhong et al., 2018). In addition, the severe

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psychological impacts of floods include detachment, identity crisis and dialectics with the place (Carroll et al., 2009). Frequent psychosocial losses included losses of routine, sense of control, sense of optimism, accomplishing goals, and time with loved ones (Smith & Freedy, 2000). Along with acute impacts of disasters, the chronic problems were experienced by those affected are financial stress, troubled family and interpersonal relationships, concerns about the wider community and obligations to provide support to others (Whittle et al., 2012).

The memory of damages and losses associated with floods remain a permanent reference to the discourse to everyday conversation (Mulvany, 2011). Erikson (1976) coined the notion of “collective trauma” to understand the trauma experience of the residents affected by disasters such as floods. The concept of collective trauma refers to the situation in which the basic social fabric of the communities is washed away leading to impairment of the bonds and ways that attach the people to each other causing a sense of loss of communality. Such nuanced effects of the disasters can be ascertained by delving deeper into life worlds of the survivors.

Flood-related knowledge could inform flood management and/or other action, which however can be limited by barriers, including information and resource availability, attitude, social capital, and policy barriers. However, at the same time, the flood-related knowledge and its resulting action are considered the lesson learned, which then affects flood resilience through changing floodability, recoverability, adaptability, and/or transformability (Kuang & Liao, 2020). Disaster narratives can provide a useful way to understand, acknowledge and convey the emotional impact on disaster survivors in order to help build resilience for the affected community, and potentially for other communities. Importantly, such an approach may also reveal developments which have assisted in social recovery following the event (Kargillis, Gillham & Kako, 2014).

As 2022 floods are recent phenomenon, no study has yet been conducted to document the narratives and understand the nature and meanings of the experiences of the flooding. This preliminary phenomenological study was conducted two months after the flooding to gain a deeper understanding of meaning of this traumatic experience. The participants were asked to share their meanings of flood preparedness experience, evacuation, sheltering, coping and future prospects. Specifically, the study aimed to explore how the meanings are constructed in a larger socio-cultural framework of society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted in September 2022 in Fazil Pur town of District Rajanpur. At least 176 areas were hit in the RajaPur District. Many areas of this district were hit by the floods first time of which one was the town under this study. By August 16, according to the district official record, some 1,118,898 were evacuated and transported to safer plains in 16 boats by 96 civil and army rescuers. In the first assessment, 7,11,142 acres of land got inundated, 33,645 katcha/mud or brick houses damaged, 223,415 people affected and crops spread over an area of 310,888 acres as well as 70km of road infrastructure got washed away (Haider, 2022). Fazil Pur town is called the nerve and business centre of the district. It is located adjacent to Indus highway. The town was hit by eight feet high tide of the flood water from western side and four feet of flood water from some eastern part of the city (Birmani, 2022). According to the living memory of the local residents, the town was never hit by flood disaster previously in hundred years. So the experiences shared by the flood survivors represented the newness of situation and novelty of experiences. The study adopted qualitative phenomenological approach, a method of research that seeks to explicate the personal meanings in an experience such as flood disasters. The phenomenological approach is used to investigate the phenomenon by reflecting on essential themes, writing and rewriting and connecting the part with the whole (Connelly, 2010).

The data were gathered by using interview guide. Face to face In-depth interviews were conducted with the research participants. Convenient sampling technique was adopted to reach the target participants. For this purpose, the participants whose houses were completely or severely damaged were chosen for interviews. Eight male participated were interviewed in the study. The data collector visited the severely affected area, took field notes and observed the intensity and extent of the flood. The average time for interview remained relatively shorter as the respondents were preoccupied with efforts of rehabilitation and reconstruction. Verbal consent of the respondents was sought before conducting the interview. The participants were asked to withdraw from interview if

they feel uncomfortable and they were also assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews were recorded and later on transcribed after repeated listening. The interviews started with traditional informal salutations (salam dua), asking the participants about their occupation, date and time of the flood hitting their village/area to build rapport according to the protocols of qualitative approach in social sciences research. After going native with the surrounding environment, researcher started formal interviews asking the specific questions to elicit the information according to the objectives of the research. Participants shared detailed stories of the flood i.e meanings of flood experience, news about impending flood, discussions about floods with family friends, evacuation experiences, mode and meaning of sheltering and recovery prospects. Data were analyzed by the author through reiterative reflections on written text.

## **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

Based on the reiterative reflections, following themes were identified that make up the essence of flood survivors' experiences. The themes were (1) confusion and undecidedness (2) chaos and selfishness (3) shame and guilt (4) shock and disbelief (5) helpfulness and expectation

### **Confusion and undecidedness**

Confusion and disbelief were expressed by the participants, when they were asked about the information related to impending of flood disasters and preparedness measures. Participants reported the lack of trustworthy information regarding the flood risk in their area. As this town was never hit by flood disaster previously, participants described that they heard from different sources about the threat of the flood. But we were confused about what to do first. A participant explained that *"we were informed about flood by people around us. We were much confused and embarrassed. Due to confusion and undecidedness we got late and could not evacuate well in time that caused a lot of loss to our movable things"*. Another participant explained the situation as *"we were informed by neighbors and friends to evacuate the house when the flood waters a very much near to us. At that time we were very much perplexed about what to save and what not"*.

### **Chaos and selfishness**

The participants reported a situation of turmoil and commotion. When asked by the researcher about their experiences of evacuation and rescue, the participants shared very emotional stories. One participant reported that *"when we are sure that flood is going to hit our locality, we decided to move. There was situation of "afratafri" and "nafsa nafsi"*. Another participant explained the situation in more radical way keeping in view the Islamic concept of the day of judgement. He reported that at that *"it was like a day of resurrection (lgtā tha k qyamat ka din hi or sb logon ko bs apni apni fikr hi). Everybody was thinking about himself. No one had the time and opportunity to help other as we used to help in the normal times. There was hue and cry every where"*. Another participant reported *"the situation was very tense and we were at double edged sword. It was difficult to evacuate the children and the livestock simultaneously (maal sambhalon ya baal). We were very much embarrass and confused. The other decision was where tog o and how to go. We were very much worried about the status of our houses. We were much confused about what to save and what not"*.

### **Shame and guilt**

Flood disasters severely affected the livelihood of the people. Many people had to evacuate in emergency, so they could not shift their stored grain to safer places. While others lost their businesses and livelihood. Particularly, the wage laborers lost their labor market. Such dynamics created the situation of food shortage and disruption of food supplies. While the disaster aid provided by the governments reached late or it was never received by many participants, the flood victims shared their stories regarding the availability of food with pain and agony. Secondly, the method of food delivering by the local philanthropists and NGOs was very much insulting and humiliating. One participant narrated this situation as *"we are sufaid posh, we cannot stand in the queue for ration. This is small city. Everybody knows everyone. So it is very shameful to stand in queues for a shopping bag of cooked rice"*. Participant also expressed shame and guilt due to becoming dependent on the friends and relatives. One participant narrated it as *"no one can imagine how much it is painful being homeless. How much it is matter of shame for one to depend on friends and relatives and live in other's home with women and children. We were very much concerned about the privacy (chadar aur char dewari) of our family. We cannot fight for ration. It is not possible for us to cook independently. We are already impoverished and flood has made us more poor and vulnerable"*. Secondly, the

participant also shared their concerns regarding the availability of toilets in tents and evacuation centers established by the governments and NGOs. One participant reported that “*in evacuation shelters, either there no toilets available or there were combined toilets for men and women, so the women had to go out to answer the call of nature which is very shameful and disgusting for us*”.

### **Shock and disbelief**

As flood never hit this town earlier, many participants expressed shock and disbelief. The described that it was impossible for them to believe that their area was hit by the flood disaster and their homes were destroyed and they had to move out of their area like an alien and without their will. One participant narrated it as under “*we cannot not believe that flood can hit our town. It has not hit in last 100 years*”. Another participant reported that “*all of sudden we were caught by water, it is unexplainable. High school of Fazil Pur was submerged in the blink of an eye. Our village was submerged in seconds. It caught us unaware. Water caught us in the night. It was very much difficult time. It was very much puzzling situation and we were very much worried. Our stored grain was washed away, home was washed away. We requested 1122 and they came early in the morning*”. Another participant expressed his emotions in the form poem translated from local Seraiki language to English:

*Look I am helpless*

*Look How long are the banks (kinaray)*

*We look at the stars in the night*

*Now look at the stars are in the day*

*Look how destroyed are we poor people*

*No one can make the repair the damages*

*The damages caused are irreparable*

*The situation is very much clear to you*

*Don't think about me, but look at my plight*

*I am contented with your (God) will*

*Look how I am trying to make both ends meet*

*Oh my beloved, you look at the sun everyday*

*Today, look at the darkness (flood) as well*

### **Hopefulness and expectations**

The participants expressed extreme form of helplessness due to damage caused to their lives and property. Almost all the participants expressed their concerns regarding non availability of sufficient resources to rebuild their damaged/destroyed house. However the participants expressed hope that Allah will help them to come out of this situation. One participant explained it as “*house is the one of the important thing that was that has been destroyed. We look to the help of God for our lossess and also request Government to help us so that we could build our houses. We have suffered a huge damage. One participant expressed that they moved to our relatives during evacuation periods. They were also hard pressed. It was a very hard time but their house reminded us of our own house. He described that “we hope that God will make the reparations of losses”. It was very much tough time. God is very merciful. He will help to reconstruct our house (ghar aakhir ghar hota hi). The participants also pinned their hope in the government that it will come forward to help them. One participant expressed this expectation as “we also expect government to help us so that we can reconstruct our houses. We moved to our brother home. There is situation of hopelessness and hope as well”.*

### **Summary**

This phenomenological study was conducted to two months after devastating 2010 flooding in Rajan Pur district of South Punjab to gain a deeper understanding of meaning of this traumatic experience. Two months later, the memoirs of floods experience were still fresh in the minds of the participants as they were still struggling to restart a routine life as it was before the onset of disaster. Data analysis uncovered five essential themes making the essence of the flood experiences. These are (1) confusion and undecidedness (2) chaos and selfishness (3) shame and guilt (4) shock and disbelief (5) hopefulness and expectation.

These findings are partially aligned with studies conducted preciously to understand the phenomenological experiences of disaster survivors (e.g. Keene, 1998; Mearidy-Bell, 2013).

However, the point of difference with above cited studies is the preoccupation of the respondents with loss of privacy and shame and guilt associated with living in the shelters and seeking for help to individuals or standing in the cues for ration. The stigma attached to such phenomenon has been well researched and reported by previous disaster researchers such as Fothergill (2003). Living in a close-knit collective society like rural settings of Pakistan, the social interaction is shaped by multiple layers of relation where the feelings such as shame and guilt are shaped easily and are specific to psychosocial set up of the society (Zaidi & Ali, 2017).

The floods created unparalleled havoc destroying the homes and disrupting the normal social life. Along with decimating the built infrastructure, the floods caused a massive dislocation leading to loss of communality and sense of community. The findings of the study reflect how the meanings of traumatic experience such as flood disaster can shape important decisions such as evacuations, sheltering, giving the help seeking it from their friends, relatives, NGOs, philanthropists and government agencies. The impacts of such flood experience are of major concern for all the stakeholders.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The profound of psycho-social impacts of devastating 2022 floods are very much clear in the stories of the study participants. The strong currents of water caused more than damage to physical infrastructure. This study draws our attention that flood experiences had strong emotional implications for the victims which can further impact their notions about life and wellbeing, hope and resilience. The themes illuminated by this qualitative study helped us to delve deeper into strong effects of the flooding that could remain obscured if a quantitative approach with predetermined questions was adopted. This study suggests that meanings of flood experience could affect the rehabilitation and recovery efforts of the participants that can be further studied by using the combination of both quantitative and qualitative approach. This study is not devoid of limitations. Only involving the male participants is the major shortcoming of this research. Further studies must involve participants for different socio-economic groups and people from different categories such as women, children and older adults. A longitudinal qualitative study involving the lived experiences of the flooding in different phases of disasters such as preparedness, response and recovery would give a vivid reflection of what is going on in the minds and hearts of the participants.

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