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“Development on the margin”

Precarious Livelihoods Along India’s Disaster-prone Eastern Coastline: socio-political and Environmental Dimensions of Vulnerability and Recovery

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Abstract

In academic and policy debates there is increasing recognition and more explicit concern of the social dimensions of hazard and vulnerability, beyond their physical properties. Exposure to hazard results in disaster when the functioning of a community or society is seriously disrupted, when it is unable to cope using its own resources. Vulnerability encompasses not only the likelihood of physical exposure to the hazard, but also people’s underlying susceptibility to its effects, and their ability to cope, respond and adapt. Recovery takes place when a household or community not only re-establishes its livelihood, physical assets and patterns of access, but when it becomes more resilient to the next extreme event (Wisner, Blaikie et al 2004).

This paper draws on a multi-method research project undertaken in 2010 in Odisha, one of India’s poorest states. The research sought to examine the environmental and socio-political dimensions of recovery and ongoing vulnerability of the coastal population through a programme of current and retrospective enquiry spanning ten years since the devastating supercyclone of 1999. Though falling in one of Odisha’s more prosperous districts, the research locale is politically and economically marginal, with caste and ethnicity creating social marginalisation at the village-level. The research villages are located in an ecologically sensitive estuarine region where mono-cropped paddy cultivation replaced natural mangroves in the early and mid-20th century, and where prawn/shrimp farming has more recently been practised — with varying outcomes.

The paper demonstrates that ten years on from 1999, study households continue to experience a high degree of ongoing vulnerability with respect to livelihoods. The paper argues that the minimal recovery of livelihoods is related to the inability of the poorest households in accessing vital resources from the state and other agencies. There are clear limits to the extent of assistance available within the community beyond the immediate aftermath of a disaster. The central message of the paper lies in highlighting that in the longer term, recovery, and hence resilience is a function not just of the scale of a disaster but also of the resources people are able to access over a prolonged period of time.

Keywords: Coastal, disaster, environment, livelihood, politics, recovery, vulnerability