**The ever vulnerable**

Mir Adnan Aziz

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Natural phenomena have since forever challenged and threatened humankind. In doing so, they have served as imperatives to create means and measures that limit damage to lives and land.

Over time, the consequences of these phenomena have increasingly come within the ambit of human management. Natural occurrences only become a disaster if communities are harmed by it. An old adage says: ‘sit on a beehive and call it fate’. Our unremorseful rulers declare the devastation wrought by these occurrences as unavoidable acts of nature and conveniently absolving themselves of their responsibilities.

The 2005 earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter Scale saw northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Azad Kashmir reeling from its horrendous aftermath. Around 87,350 people perished including 19,000 children in 17,000 destroyed schools. In 2010, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake devastated Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, killing 200,000 people. Just six weeks later, an earthquake measuring 8.8, sixth strongest in history, struck Chile generating a tsunami with 29 meter waves; 521people lost their lives. Chile was spared mass destruction because of strictly enforced building and zoning codes, sound infrastructure and a disaster management protocol as compared to a totally compromised system in Pakistan and Haiti.

Having learnt nothing from the 2010 and 2012 floods, we faced yet another catastrophe in the 2022 deluge. It saw 1739 people lose their lives with 33 million affected; 897,014 houses were totally destroyed. Bangladesh has an enabling funnel shaped bay and is occasionally battered by the worst cyclones in the world. In November 1970, Cyclone Bhola struck the then East Pakistan with a 20 feet storm surge and winds in excess of 225 km/h; 500,000 people lost their lives. The tragedy became a flashpoint for the existing alienation and ultimate separation from its erstwhile half.

Cyclones in 2007 and 2009 saw 3590 people losing their lives. In May 2020, super cyclone Amphan made landfall in Bangladesh with 190 kilometers per hour winds and 17 feet high storm-water surges. Preemptive measures like evacuation of 2.4 million people and increasing existing shelters from 5000 to nearly 13,000 saw 26 fatalities. It is pertinent to note that social distancing was ensured in the shelters as this was at the peak of the Covid pandemic.

After independence, Bangladesh set up a Cyclone Preparedness Program overseen by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief. Over time, this comprehensive programme inducted over 76,000 volunteers. The defining aspect was that half were women, the gender most impacted by cyclones. Multi-layered early warning systems were developed along with the means of conveying impending threats. Micro-level awareness saw dedicated disaster management prostoot, learning through playing programmes, initiated at school level. The stated goal of this initiative is to build a future generation that is aware and ready to deal with disasters.

Apart from this, government and local leaders got together to formulate disaster management measures. Flood-resistant tubewells were built and means of livelihood were introduced that would not be affected by floods. Natural preventive approaches such as mangrove plantation were encouraged along with imparting hygiene and first aid training. Toilets in flood prone areas were built above the expected flood levels. This is the hallmark of caring and compassionate leaders who have the foresight to create a safe and enabling environment for the wellbeing of their people.

Today, Bangladesh is globally recognized and described as a country trailblazing the fight against disasters. This remarkable achievement proves that Bangladesh’s people are considered valuable beings whose lives and livelihoods have to be protected. Ironically, the ever prowling for an opportunity mindset of our rulers has them using disasters as means to globetrot on yet more aid pleading sprees. An indicator was the absence of policy or plan apart from the single objective of seeking reparations at the UN’s COP27 climate talks held in Egypt last year.

Aqueduct Floods measures and maps global flood risks. Its findings predict that by 2030, flooding caused by climate change will impact larger populations in Southeast Asia than the rest of the world combined. It also found that every $1 spent on flood protection infrastructure in India results in $248 in avoided damages while reducing the likelihood of these areas being flooded by half. In Bangladesh, $1 spent on such measures saw $123 in avoided damages and reduced the likelihood of floods from 20 per cent to 4.0 per cent. Prudent policies and investment in mitigation pays direct and huge dividends when a disaster occurs.

A chilling remark attributed to Joseph Stalin says, “a single death is a tragedy; a million a statistic”. Day after day our danse macabre continues be it infant mortality, preventable diseases, floods, road accidents, building collapses, gas cylinder explosions or a myriad of problems that plague us for want of honest and able governance. The destructive fallout has been compounded by corruption, cronyism, clientelism and heavy-handed central governance totally oblivious to the miseries at the grassroots level.

The ubiquitous failure of our ruling cycles sees no facet of our lives spared by its destructive fallout. Our power elite, infatuated with self-centered objectives, see public office as their entitlement; the responsibility it entails is treated with contemptuous disdain. Despite the predictive ever-increasing risk of far worse weather patterns and occurrences, integration of mitigative measures figures nowhere in our political jargon and governance deliverables.

In ancient Greece ‘apatheia’ – meaning ‘without passions’ – was deemed a virtue. Philosophers described it as indifference to worldly temptations and something to be sought and cherished. The apathy of our power elite, certainly no virtue, is a self-centered callous mindset completely oblivious to the plight of the ruled: the ever-vulnerable subjects.

The writer is a freelance contributor. He can be reached at: miradnanaziz@gmail.com