

**NATURAL CALAMITY, MAN MADE DISASTER**  
**FACT FINDING REPORT**  
**ON THE FLOODS IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR**  
**BY**  
**THE CENTRE FOR POLICY ANALYSIS**



The Centre for Policy Analysis organised a visit to Jammu and Kashmir with the purpose of bringing out an interim report on the flood situation in the state. The

team comprised Tushar Gandhi, Anand Sahay and Seema Mustafa. Bula Devi coordinated the visit.

The team visited Srinagar, the worst affected in the Valley along with the South Kashmir districts, and spoke to residents, shopkeepers, the youth who organised relief operations, and journalists, including the Editor of Rising Kashmir Shujaat Bukhari, who also took up rescue and relief operations.

The team also met the Chief Secretary and top officials of the state government, Congress leaders Ghulam Nabi Azad and Salman Soz, Peoples Democratic Party leaders Mehbooba Mufti and Naeem Akhtar, Hurriyat leader Mirwaiz Umer Farooq, and top Jamaat e Islami leaders, including the Amir and many others.

Serious trouble has many dimensions. In Kashmir, after the recent floods -- the worst not only in the last one hundred years but probably of all times -- which devastated not just the habitation of lakhs of people but also every aspect of the economy and an entire way of life, perhaps the most striking feature is the absence of any effort towards mobilisation of the national will by the state government and the Centre.

The government of Chief Minister Omar Abdullah was caught unawares by nature's fury and, as might well have happened in any state in India, its inefficiencies and incapacities to rush in relief or rehabilitation (after its initial failure to rescue) even several days after the flood waters rose up to 40 feet in some parts of the city (such as Ram Munshi Bagh) left the people angry and disillusioned.

The three-member CPA team visiting the Kashmir Valley from September 27 to 29 heard elaborations of this all over Srinagar, from senior mainstream politicians and important separatist leaders, as well as ordinary people at relief camps and on the streets.

Hardly any less striking has been the failure of the Union government to provide moral support and material assistance on the scale required. High representatives of the Union government made pro forma flying visits. Exactly one month after large parts of Srinagar were submerged on September 7, 2014, following four days of frighteningly heavy and unseasonal rains, it is reasonable to assert that the Centre has failed to mobilise the country behind the gargantuan task of rehabilitation of Kashmir valley.

Immediately after much of the Valley was marooned, Prime Minister Narendra Modi used appropriate words to describe the catastrophe. He called it a “national disaster”. A month after, those words seem empty. There has been no move through radio and television to rally the nation behind Kashmir. Red tape has not been cut to rush finances to the beleaguered state under special dispensations or through special purpose vehicles devised to meet an unforeseen and extraordinary situation which has negatively impacted lakhs of lives in a state which is routinely described as “sensitive” on account of its geostrategic position. Perhaps this is why the Prime Minister referred to the issue of relief for disaster-hit Kashmir in his speech in the United Nations at the end of September, but his words do not seem to have travelled beyond the four walls of the General Assembly.

In contrast, the promptness of voluntary aid -- although this is bound to be a drop in the ocean in relation to the scale of the calamity -- from all corners of India has been a touching demonstration of what the human heart is capable of and what individual will can achieve. In Srinagar, the CPA group came across scores of relief teams from different parts of the country engaged in offering medical assistance to people at risk of contracting deadly diseases if not attended to with speed.

It is our heartfelt wish that political and social activists from all parts of India visit the Kashmir valley and the hill terrain of Jammu in Rajouri and Poonch to see how their fellow citizens have suffered, and find ways to help them generously and with the utmost diligence. The state government is not sure even at this stage what exactly happened on the September 7 and 8, 2014 when much of Srinagar -- the seat of government, the centres of business, trade and industry, and the tourist spots in Jammu and Kashmir’s capital city -- capsized, parts of it such as Ram Munshi Bagh going under 40 feet of water.

The command and control locations and apparatus have not been struck by disaster in any other state capital before. This compounded the Kashmir tragedy in the wake of rain and flood and made the task of rescue, relief and rehabilitation incomparably complex.

The state Chief Secretary, Mr Iqbal Khandey, and his senior officials told the CPA fact-finding team that a technical assessment will have to be made about what exactly happened. The Jhelum river snakes its way through the ancient city of Srinagar some 60 kilometres after it takes its rise in South Kashmir. Four days of blinding rain had caused the river to swell. It breached its banks at Kandizal in South Kashmir’s Pulwama district, some 15 kilometres from Srinagar.

This led to the initial assessment that Srinagar might be saved from what looked like certain disaster, the speed at which the water level was rising, as the water might now be discharged away from densely inhabited areas. But this was not to be. The senior officials said the flood refill channel running approximately parallel to the Jhelum in Srinagar had been built in 1902 on the assumption that the river, when in spate, would not be carrying more than 80,000 cusecs of water while passing through Srinagar, and some 35,000 cusecs of this would be discharged into the flood refill channel if need arose. The assumption had held for 112 years. Over the years, however, the flood channel has not been tested. Indeed, housing has come up on and around it and this was bound to impede water flow in an emergency. That emergency struck in the first week of September.

This year, say officials, the gauge stations, which are monitored hourly, went under. They estimate that 1,20,000 cusecs of water was coursing through Srinagar on September 7 and 8, the equivalent of the flow of three Jhelums in Srinagar. How this came to be is wholly unclear, especially after the breaching of the Jhelum banks at Kandizal. To explain this, the top officials said there might have been multiple cloud bursts on the night of September 6 around Srinagar, before the river enters the big city.

This is a completely untested hypothesis and may be a convenient and contrived explanation. Therefore, a thorough inquiry is in order. In slightly more specific terms the team has attempted to segregate the areas of concern into the following, to give a more specific understanding of the situation on the ground today:

**THE FLOODS:** Water levels rose alarmingly with the rains and flood waters rising to submerge districts in South Kashmir. The state government and the authorities were caught completely off guard even though the team was told by concerned officials that the water levels of the rivers were monitored almost hourly. However, there seems to have been no effort to warn the people in South Kashmir, and to evacuate the villages, many of them are reported to have been washed away by the torrential waters. People were rescued by the Army and by volunteers from their homes after days, with any number of stories narrated to the team members about the trauma and the suffering of the local residents who barely managed to escape with their lives.

Despite this, there seemed to be little understanding of how the South Kashmir deluge would impact other parts of the state. Some effort --- minimalist in our view --- was made by the state government to ask the people to evacuate their homes. The radio and the loudspeakers on mosques were used as the communication

system for this by the state government. However, no one, not even the authorities, took the warnings seriously with the government making no effort to evacuate the residents or even itself for that matter. The warnings thus remained at best a token response to the South Kashmir situation where the waters had risen dramatically and the rivers had already started flowing far over the danger mark.

The state government, meanwhile, made no effort to requisition boats, life jackets and prepare for rescue operations. An indication of the non-preparedness comes from the fact that the government that is adept at moving its darbar to Jammu in the winter months, did not even lift a finger to move itself to safe, dry land where it could remain in contact with the people. Despite the fact that floods hit the state every now and again --- of course never as severe as this --- there seems to be no disaster management protocol in place.

The result is that when the rivers breached the bunds, and came rushing into the city everyone was caught unawares. Resident after resident told the team of how the waters moved from puddles outside on the roads to the second floor of houses with dramatic speed. One young man said he was running down the street to his house with the waters literally roaring behind him as he ran.

Within hours Srinagar was literally drowning in the torrential flood waters that had acquired a high current. The Army cantonment was flooded as were all the officials, with the government having disappeared from sight.

All communication broke down, and the city blacked out as residents tried to save their lives in the dark. Many who spoke to us broke down in tears while narrating the trauma. They were trapped and were saved only because many of the houses have attics where the families took refuge as the water swirled around them.

**THE RESCUE:** The state government and the administration was caught unawares and once Srinagar was flooded under 20+ feet of water the State machinery officials, police and military were all submerged and paralysed. Victims cannot rescue nor can they provide relief and this is exactly what happened as officials, police and Army found themselves marooned and got into the victim frame of mind. So in the moment of crisis they were not able to perform their responsibility as saviours.

In the first stage even as the Army was marshalling boats and its resources, the youth started braving the waters to save their families, neighbours and themselves as the waters kept rising and many buildings were demolished in front of their eyes. To their credit the Kashmiri youth, condemned as rioters and stone throwers,

rose to the occasion and became the heroic rescuers. If it was not for their very timely, heroic, innovative and tireless effort the tragedy would have been much more grim and the casualty figure in Srinagar much greater. The youth of Srinagar deserves commendation, congratulations and gratitude. When they extracted themselves from being victims the armed forces too performed commendably but it must be said that they too were absent at the grimmest initial hours.

The Kashmiri youth broke down furniture, water tanks and all they could find to put together rough boats to rescue the people. They were joined soon by the Army that did a great job but was bound to some extent by the protocol of saving VIPs, tourists, and then the civilians in that order. Besides the Army continued with the protocol of security with each rescue boat manned by at least five to six jawans, and therefore having little room for the civilians shouting for help. However, the soldiers worked day and night both in Srinagar and other affected parts of the state, with any number of Kashmiris praising the efforts. But as a journalist said, and it is a view with which this team agrees, the Army did its job with commendation but it was the Kashmiri youth --- many of whom did not know how to swim --- who were the unsung heroes of what had by then become a mammoth rescue operation.

RELIEF: Relief Operations perforce had to begin while the rescue was on as the lakhs of people marooned had run out of food and drinking water. The rescue boats started carrying water and food packets, with choppers being used to throw packets that fell into the waters instead of into the hands of the people. There is a six per cent higher than national average of diabetes in the state, with insulin and medicines becoming another essential need.

Again, the state government remained paralysed, and it was the youth, the journalists and others who came together to identify the immediate needs of the people, and send out help calls on the social media for the items required. They formed teams to distribute the relief material with the Army of course taking care of the larger operations on this front. However, the absence of the civilian administration hampered the work of the Army as well in the relief operations with serious problems of coordination that still do not seem to have been rectified.

Individuals and organisations from cities outside Jammu and Kashmir contributed greatly in sending across teams of doctors and volunteers as well as relief material. Very soon, because of coordination between civil society groups and the Kashmiris, the scarcity of medicines like insulin was overcome. Most Kashmiris spoken to said there was sufficient material in the form of clothes, medicines, drinking water but the problem remained in the coordination, and the

red tapism of the state government in allowing them to clear the material without the usual red tapism.

The result was that large piles of relief material got collected at the airport while the state government officials wrangled over the paper work. This has also led to a perception, right or wrong, that the National Conference and its government is trying to seize the goods meant for relief for others, and distribute it under its own banner for political mileage.

However, the government has been more visible in this field now than it was earlier and vaccination teams have been moving around the affected areas to prevent an epidemic. The swift clearance of carcasses is a plus for the government and the local bodies, with the cold weather contributing to the fact that large scale disease has not engulfed the devastated state because of the stagnant water and the continuing rot. A major problem is the onsetting winter with blankets, warm clothes and shelters urgently required. Not much has moved on this front as well, with lakhs still homeless with their homes either washed away or in no state to be occupied because of the damp and the erosion by the flood waters that have rendered most of the houses unsafe.

**REHABILITATION:** The damage caused to government installations, official housing and infrastructure, public works such as roads, bridges, school and hospital buildings, administrative offices, electrical installations and electronic networks, besides severe damage to agriculture (rice crop) and horticulture (the apple crop this year) is being officially estimated at Rs. 30,000 crore. Unofficially political parties estimate the losses at Rs 100,000 crores. This, however, seems a guess more than an approximation. If the severe losses sustained by private citizens -- their homes, businesses, industries all gone -- are considered, a considerably higher amount would seem plausible and the figure of Rs. 100,000 crore may not be extravagant, though this is also something of an educated guess. An urgent damage assessment conducted by top-flight professionals with relevant experience is, thus, strongly indicated.

Mr. Bashir Mir, the president of the apple growers' association of Wagoora tehsil of Baramulla district, Kashmir's most valuable apple region, informed the CPA team that approximately 25,000 apple-growing horticulturists of Baramulla district, would have been eligible for kisan loans from the banking sector of the order of rupees two to three lakhs each. They would not be able to repay the loan this year on account of gushing flood waters hitting the apple orchards. Prior to that the crop was already affected by a deadly pesticide. A similar number of horticulturists is

likely to be adversely affected for the same reasons in the Pulwama and Shopian districts of South Kashmir. If the horticulturists' loans are not waived this year, the apple farmers will be driven to rack and ruin.

Their incomes would be down to about 20 per cent of the norm while they would be obliged to pay seven per cent interest on their bank loans if the debt is not discharged within the year. Similar situations have driven farmers to commit suicide in several states, including the well-to-do ones such as Punjab, Karnataka and Maharashtra.

The rehabilitation process is going to be a massive undertaking with conservative estimates putting the reconstruction of Kashmir at a minimum of five years. There is no indication that the government is even seized of this with Kashmiris all speaking of the urgency with which this should be tackled to prevent trauma, depression and of course, more deaths in the deadly winters. The Chief Secretary, however, said this would be done but the speed of governance, despite the urgency, seems to have hit an all time low.

**MEDIA:** The role of the 'national' media television channels needs to be singled out in this report as the coverage has added to the chaos and the trauma of the floods. Most television anchors and editors were flown into Kashmir at military hospitality, were taken over the affected areas in choppers and put together a coverage exalting the role of the Army, as against that of the heroic youth. As senior politicians in Kashmir told the team, and there was rare unanimity in all on this, "if the media had not gone on and on about the role of the Army at the expense of all others, the rescue efforts would have actually brought the Army and the Kashmiris closer together."

Instead the reverse happened. The insensitive questions while the flood waters were surging about how it felt being rescued by the "occupation" Army had no meaning for the Kashmiris striving to survive. The anger spilled out as communications were restored and the news spread through the Valley. Hurriyat leader Mirwaiz Umer Farooq told the team that the Army had done good work of course and that everyone appreciated its efforts "but no one even bothered to report what our young people did, they really were the heroes of this calamity."

Mehbooba Mufti was almost passionate in her anger with the media for creating severe complications when none needed to exist. She said the one sided coverage had done immense damage in Jammu and Kashmir as it gave a lopsided and prejudiced view of the rescue operations. Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad was

also highly critical of the senior journalists staying away from the city, in sanitised surroundings, without bothering to report what was happening on the ground.

At a time when the media could have acted as a cementing factor, it created a chasm that has impacted heavily on the Kashmiri psyche in this hour of disaster. The over reporting of a couple --- the team could not document a third --- of incidents of stone throwing at helicopters have also added to the fury. One of these incidents happened because the chopper hovering over some stranded residents was stirring the waters below and the unstable boat with people in it was in fear of capsizing. So they picked up pebbles or whatever they could to get the helicopter to leave. The other, as the residents said, was in anger over the non-visibility of the government that the Army officers themselves understood.

The media's insistence on scoring brownie points over the separatists in the midst of disaster has not gone down well in Kashmir at all. JKLF leader Yasin Malik did not hijack a boat as was reported, but insisted that when the relief was distributed in his area he should be also part of it. Also the Army did not save Hurriyat leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani from the floods as the Delhi media reported for the simple reason that there were no floods in Hyderpora, where he stays.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** 1. A judicial probe-based on well-grounded technical assessments -- into the causes of the flood waters entering Srinagar. Its terms of reference should include the status of the state government's preparedness to cope with such a situation, and its actual performance once the tragedy struck since in the perception of most people the state government became "invisible".

2. A probe by an appropriate authority into the rescue operations conducted by the military. Many in Srinagar attest to their effectiveness, but also complain about their prioritisation. The general belief is that the focus of rescue by the armed forces was not ordinary Kashmiris but tourists, select members of the Kashmiri elite, and migrant labourers who have been living in the valley over the years.

3. The framework of the probe into the conduct of the armed forces should include the work of their PR department which seemed to have gone into overdrive, resulting in very skewed television coverage that has only succeeded in tilting the perception against the Army and the country. This could have security-related repercussions.

4. The electronic media played a very disruptive and vitiating role and gave reason to the Kashmiris to be hurt and angry. The efficiency of the operations was

impacted by the one sided reporting. Media presence during relief and rescue operations should be sensitively handled as a policy.

5. An independent enquiry by civil society -- including individuals and groups within Kashmir that bravely rushed forward with assistance of their own accord, voluntary organisations from across the country that involved themselves in relief work in Jammu and Kashmir, state political parties, and technical experts of different kinds from State and other parts of the country -- to assess damage and financial costs that must be made good.

6. An appeal to all sections of society to maintain calm in the face of this massive tragedy and focus on a constructive approach, rather than look for partisan political advantage.

7. The government and administration with the help of civil society must create a disaster management protocol and a chain of command so that the same mistakes that facilitated the calamity to turn into a disaster of such tragic magnitude will not occur again. A natural and organic chain of command must be established. Young men who performed so heroically and ingeniously must be made a part of a volunteer disaster rescue force. The bureaucracy must be trained to not remain captives of the rule book in times of calamity and work apart from the rule book and in an innovative manner.

8. The state Government must also have a protocol in place where a line of command is established so that in case a calamity incapacitates part of the government, there is a chain of command that can take control and coordinate the emergency response to the calamity.

9. A national disaster response protocol must be established which intervenes in a tragedy without waiting for an appeal from the state in case of a calamity. One point that angered the people of Kashmir was that they found products which were much past their expiry dates. This must be avoided.

10. Specifically in Srinagar the stalled proposals to create efficient flood drainage systems must be expeditiously revived and urgently implemented.

11. A campaign must be urgently launched to provide blankets and warm clothing on a large scale; this should be a civil society initiative.

12. When rebuilding is commenced after relief is provided there should be a watchdog committee in place which is non governmental and non political to

ensure that the rebuilding effort both in Srinagar and in South Kashmir as well as affected parts of Jammu is done in a legal and ethical manner. There is a danger of the politician-official-builder mafia nexus exploiting the tragedy to profiteer and indulge in land grab and encroachment.

13. It may be time for the army to re-evaluate their establishments, too. With climate change the probability of such calamities becoming more frequent and progressively more severe is very likely. The military base was waterlogged even 15 days after the disaster. The initial flood marooned the Army base in Srinagar and rendered it inoperable. Such a situation could be strategically disastrous. The Defence ministry will have to rethink about their location in Srinagar and may have to shift to higher elevation. The Army must not be rendered inoperable in an emergency.

When things return to normal in Kashmir the various socio political religious groups who acted responsibly immediately, compassionately and bravely to rescue and provide relief to the marooned and distressed populace must be commended and honoured for their actions.