

The Media and Other Disasters

Mr. Sunil Jain

Contributing Editor

Business Standard, India

While the media has an important role to play in terms of warning people of disasters that are about to happen (such as cyclones and floods) and to help them during the disaster (through public broadcasts, for instance), the media's real role is to ensure there is preparedness to deal with disasters. Preparedness, both on the part of the government as well as the citizens. And, in the case of a country like India, where completely disparate disasters (floods, drought, earthquakes, cyclones) hit different parts of the country, indeed sometimes even the same part of the country, there is an urgent need to ensure lessons from each disaster are learnt and implemented. Very often, however, since different disasters happen in quick succession, no lessons are learnt from the previous disaster. The media's role is to guard against this. Sadly, in India, the media has not been equal to its responsibility.

A few examples should help illustrate the point. Gujarat, as a rule, is one of the better administered states in India, and its relief work and even preparedness is quite good (of course, one needs to keep in mind that India, even at the best of times, has poor medical and other facilities that become so important in times of calamities). Yet, as the Bhuj earthquake showed, the state was completely unprepared for an earthquake. This despite the fact the state is located in one of India's most seismic zones. Surely the media needed to focus on this?

But, even more important, it was discovered when hundreds of buildings collapsed during the earthquake, that even basic building codes had not been adhered to in the state, thanks to a corrupt district administration that allowed the builders to violate rules. I have not seen, in the aftermath of the earthquake, any attempt to either strengthen either the building codes, or even the system of monitoring the adherence to these codes. Non-adherence to building codes, including fire safety, is a chronic problem in India, but gets covered as an issue in the country's media only during times of crisis, when there's a big fire or a building collapse. And, despite the fact that earthquake proofing is a relatively cheap affair (as Prof Arya of Roorkee University has shown) and the benefits to be reaped from this are enormous, no one in the press has been writing about how this needs to be done in Gujarat or other earthquake-prone areas.

A similar situation pertains to states like West Bengal and Orissa that, like any other coastal area, are cyclone prone. Yet, both states have hardly any cyclone shelters. India periodically has droughts which cause thousands of deaths every few years. While this is certainly due to the shortage of rain, the main reason is that just 40 per cent of India is irrigated. Yet, every time there's a drought, thousands of crore rupees get spent on drought relief. But it's worth asking where the relief is going, in the sense that why is it not going towards drought-proofing India, for making irrigation projects and canals?

The media has two other important functions. One, to ensure the government acts quickly in times of crisis. Two, to highlight success stories and enthuse those working in disaster areas. The Indian media has been very pro-active in the first role, but less so in the case of the second. Till even the Latur earthquake a decade ago, the government of India was hesitant to accept international assistance and, as a result, hundreds died in earthquakes for instance, when rescue teams didn't know where there were people crushed under buildings. The media coverage forced the government to change its approach, and today, the government accepts any help immediately. Criticism from the press forced the government to send in a different person (Narendra Modi) to handle the relief and rehabilitation in Gujarat, and that ensured Gujarat's relief work was one of the best in India. Highlighting the complete chaos in the post-earthquake relief operations – reports talked of doctors' teams remaining at the airport for over 36 hours, for instance – ensured that the government then deputed senior officers to the airport so that they could give proper directions/instructions to relief teams

In 1994, Surat in Gujarat was hit by a plague which resulted in 600,000 people fleeing from the city. Yet, just three years later, Surat was judged one of the cleanest cities in India, primarily due to the

efforts of the city's municipal commissioner. There were reports of this in the newspapers only after the government awarded him a Padmashri, a civilian award for good work.

The media, it must be said, has of course become more responsible over a period of time. During the Gujarat earthquake for instance, TV channels like NDTV for instance, were running centres to help victims contact their families, and messages were run across in tickers on the television screen.

Thank you.