

Waiting for politics at the mercy of river: case study of an enduring community¹

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This paper forms part of a the DRR2DEV programme including a range of case studies, discussion and analysis and inviting further participation in thinking critically about how to do development differently and better.

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Summary

During the 12 years of the organisation's work with the people of Basti Rindan – a remote village on the right bank of mighty river Indus in the south of Punjab, it confronted two major challenges. First, to convince and mobilise the community to protest against criminal silence of the government for not taking any action to stop riverbank erosion as all lobbying and advocacy efforts had failed. For most of the community members, riverbank erosion was the outcome of their sins. Second, they wanted the NGO to do everything for them and this would have undermined its own approach – acting just as a catalyst and let the partners take the lead role. The lack of funding was also a challenge but a minor one. In order to deal with these challenges, it adopted a two-pronged approach: minimised direct interaction with the community while kept communication alive with few activists and second, kept raising riverbank issue with relevant officials and media.

As we often say disasters also create opportunities for improvement and reform. In June 2017, a nearby groyne was damaged and inundated large area, which caused huge losses. It transformed the already simmering anger into a huge rage that triggered an official intervention. Within six months, three spurs were built. On 11 November 2017, the author held another meeting with the community. There was almost an agreement that protests demos made the real impact – it unleashed many factors simultaneously and that pressured the government to act. Power of social mobilisation works, said all.

The case study: at the mercy of the river

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Prelude

“It was an utter failure, believe the members of the NGO”, for not keeping our contact alive with the disappearing community of Basti Rindan and whose members were forced into poverty – landlessness, homelessness and voicelessness. Our last contact with them had taken place in 2015. While many had left the village, others were preparing to leave as the river continued to erode their fertile land and the houses. All our efforts to mobilise them for collective action were failing. Fatalism appeared to have overwhelmed them. We had no funds to assist them.

And then “reliance on the interviews of a few so-called community leaders blinded us to the visible and invisible realities of the community”. This case study remains a work-in-progress till last minute as new developments continued to take place. The impact of newly built spurs/dikes needs to be recorded: would the spurs push back the river and if yes, how fast? Will the community rebuild Basti Rindan or not? Answers to these questions can only be found in the future [1].

But there is a need to mention here NGOs’ similar interventions along riverbanks.

In 1993, in the aftermath of 1992 super floods, the NGO had confronted a similar situation. Basti Bhart had been submerged into river Jhelum due to erosion. When we visited the site, only few ruins were left. Many people had left the area and some were living nearby in tents. We had money from Concern International and OXFAM for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of houses for the flood-affected homeless families. Some families had already received plots but many did not. We managed to get free land from the government for rest of the families. We set up a small office in the area. This created a huge attraction and brought almost all the displaced people back. Everyone was listed along with their demographic details. From our side, there was only one condition to receive the house – the new house shall be a joint ownership of wife and husband. The husbands reluctantly agreed, while the women were silently happy. More than 150 houses were built and handed over within nine months. The village continued to expand. Today, it is one of the safest villages of the area.

15 years onwards, we are facing a similar situation yet again. But we have no money for assistance. Yet, we were in a position to make the community’s miseries public and to build pressure on government for support. Reaching out to the scattered people of Basti Rindan was a herculean task. Information would come in pieces. Gaps were visible; hence, the puzzle persisted.

Background

Basti Rindan is situated on the right bank of mighty river Indus in Dera Ghazi Khan district. Though the village was only 35 km away from the district headquarters, the journey there takes hours due to poor condition of roads and transport [2]. Dera Ghazi Khan is the poorest district of the most developed province of the country – the Punjab. It is the only district of the province, which is still controlled by tribal/feudal lords and customary laws. For instance, child marriage and honour killing are still prevalent in the district. Almost all kinds of development are largely reliant on patronage– clientele relationships and this influences voting behaviour of the people. “We vote as our husbands instruct us and they vote as their tribal elders order them and tribal elders follow tribal chiefs” said Sakina Bibi. The electoral system visibly reinforces existing economic, gender, social and political inequalities.

No wonder despite many progressive public policy initiatives, change here remains elusive. The district stubbornly remains at the lowest ranking on the UNDP Human Development Index[3].

Basti Rindan had around 300 households by the end of 2010. The people of the village belong to two Baloch tribes – Rind and Korai. Rinds constitute 95 per cent of the population. A large majority of them would earn their livelihoods from tilling the land, livestock rearing and the riverine sources.

Reportedly, during the 1950s, the Rind tribe converted to Ahmadiat – a Muslim sect declared non-Muslim in 1974 by the Parliament of Pakistan. Out of 300 households, only 95 did not embrace Ahmadiat. Since they all belonged to the same tribe and were related to each other, the conversion did not create any sectarian tension. In subsequent years, another tribe embraced Ahmadiat. In 1974, anti-Ahmadi riots erupted in the country. As a result, many Ahmadis were killed in the country but during this period, the Ahmadis of Basti Rindan faced no serious trouble. As stated above, most people identify them with tribes. For Ahmadis, the tribal bond is cemented by religion, thus making religion more important than the tribe. Therefore, it may be concluded that no other form of social organization exists in the area.

Although quality of and access to social services and security (education, health, sanitation and justice) are poor and inadequate, the revenue and police departments are efficiently oppressive.

Pattan's partnership

Our first interaction with the people of Basti Rindan took place during 2005– 2006. Our work focused mainly on building capacities of female local councillors for aggregating and articulating their common issues. Our interaction with the community declined in 2008 and intensified again in the aftermath of the 2010 super floods. Since the Basti was situated on the riverbank, the flood disaster hit them profoundly. The slow riverbank erosion became faster too (Table I).

Keeping in view the gravity of the situation, when GNDR launched Action at the Frontline, Pattan decided to include Basti Rindan in the project. We had thought that the case study would help highlight the existential threat to the people-riverbank erosion. It did, but made little impact.

Table I. Timeline 2005–2017 (Pattan–Basti Rindan partnership)

Year	Activity
2005	Pattan established its link in the area through training of female local councillors
2005–2007	Pattan continued working with women councillors
2008–2010	Pattan stopped working in the area but sustained communication through women councillors
2009	Riverbank erosion accelerated
2010–2011	After the August super floods, Pattan visited the area in order to assess the damages and needs of the affected people along river Indus including Basti Rindan
2011	The super floods further accelerated the erosion and the community got desperate
2010–2013	The affected families gradually started migrating to safer areas
2013–2015	Basti Rindan was involved in VFL and AFL work. Riverbank erosion issue was highlighted through media. Pattan attempted to motivate community to sustain the protests but failed. MPs and officials were approached. No concrete response came
2016	Pattan withdrew from the area but kept communication with key persons. During this period, Nasirpur colony was built and Ahmadis moved there

2017 In June, groyne washed away and caused huge losses, which triggered protests, and media gave good coverage to the protests. Chief Ministers visited the site and announced grant for the construction of spurs. Spurs were constructed within three months

History of riverbank erosion and floods

According to the local people, the Basti had suffered from riverbank erosion in the early 1950s too. After a few years, the river moved back and people filled the vacated land with their own resources. Gradually, the displaced households came back and rebuilt their houses. Life became normal except the annual flooding which was always considered a blessing. In between 1973, 1988, 1992 and 1997 “we faced severe flooding, but we would never panic as we knew how to cope with floods” said Ramzan, an old man of the village. “The river started moving towards our village in 2008 again and by July 2010 (before the super floods), it has already destroyed around 50 houses” remembered Ramzan. Another villager shared this “the 2010 floods hit us like a meteor, we had never experienced such a devastating situation, and no-one had informed us in advance about its velocity and volume of the coming flood. It snatched away everything from us, and had accelerated the erosion; by 2014 as many as 285 houses had collapsed”.

Displacement and settlement patterns

As stated above, the Ahmadis of the village were well knit and organised. Being in minority, the Ahmadi community and its religious leader took care of the needs of its members. Though the Muslims of the village were also organised around tribal structure, they lacked similar support mechanism. This difference hugely impacted displacement/settlement patterns of the two.

Ahmadis were fully benefitted from their organisation – Jamaat-i-Ahmadiya. It bought six acres of land to settle the displaced Ahmadi families. This place is only half a mile away from the old village and the land has been given to 208 families. Most of them have settled there though their houses were still incomplete. This place is called Nasirpur Colony, named after one of their caliphs. It is not peculiar as poor families build houses incrementally. We were told that five Ahmadi families have migrated to their headquarters – Rabwah, about 300 miles to the north and eight families, whose heads were government employees, have migrated to Dera Ghazi Khan city. By July 2017, except a few, all the Ahmadi families have settled in Nasirpur colony.

Regarding Muslim families, 20 of them have moved to a nearby village – Haji Kamand. But, they call their neighbourhood Basti Rindan. About 50 families have moved to Rukh Dhol – a so-called Model Village – situated at 7 miles distance.

Livelihoods

Since most people have lost land to the river, they have to find work as labourers. Now they could either work as farm labourers or go out in the search of work. Their reliance on riverine resources has also increased. For instance, due to free access to river water and wild bushes along riverbanks, they could benefit hugely by raising animals. “Animals are like cash for us, we buy young animals, grow them. It costs us just our time as we have free access to a huge grazing area along riverbank. We sell an animal when we need to fulfil some other need”, Allah Dewaya an illiterate, a former small landowner told us with a huge confidence.

Politics of development: construction of spurs

Timely construction of spurs, dikes or groynes could have prevented riverbank erosion in the area. However, despite repeated appeals, the government did not respond when it should have. In June 2016, a groyne situated 3-km upstream of Basti Rindan suddenly broke and caused massive damage in the area. The people who had already suffered enough came out and held protest demos. The authorities were not expecting spontaneous and angry demos and were hugely embarrassed. The media (both print and electronic) gave good coverage to the issue.

What we have been trying to achieve in the last few years suddenly took place. This caused huge ripples.

Chief Minister of the Punjab province along with ministers and MPs rushed to the affected area. The riverine communities exploited this situation and demanded of the government that they construct spurs to end further erosion in the area. They advocated their case very well by providing all the previous appeals sent to the officials. The chief minister promised the protesting people that they would build spurs and dikes. Within a couple of weeks, US\$8m were made available for the construction of spurs. Finally, three spurs were constructed up and downstream of Basti Rindan, though local people are suspecting their quality. In spite of that, apparently, the riverbank has been halted for the time being.

Interestingly, politics has always played a critical role in post-disaster humanitarian work in Pakistan. All politicians, especially the incumbent MPs, find great opportunity in disasters to consolidate and widen their vote bank. We have been observing this trend since 1992 super floods. This trend has deepened since 2010 mega floods. Mr Imran Khan – former Cricketer, well-established Philanthropist turned Politician – seems mainly responsible for that. He had launched a campaign, first against the allegedly rigged general election 2013 and then against the corruption of the incumbent prime minister and his family members in 2015. It is worth stating here that the name of the ruling family has appeared in the “Panama Papers”. Since then the Supreme Court has been investigating the alleged corruption of the ruling family [4].

It is worth noting here that the chief minister of the Punjab is a younger brother of the prime minister. They are under tremendous pressure and it seems the best way for the ruling family to cope with this pressure is to respond promptly to the needs of disaster-affected people. “Many people of our area who had voted for the ruling party in 2013 elections were on the verge of joining Imran Khan’s party. But after the Chief Minister’s arrival to our area and the construction of spurs, peoples’ loyalty to the Muslim League – the ruling party – has deepened”, Munzoor told us during our recent visit.

Reflecting on action

Four inter-related barriers prevent the people of the area from taking action against the impacts of “naturally” induced phenomena. Since rivers are considered as a part of the nature and for most of the riverine people river is Badshah (emperor), it is like a god. However, this does not mean they do not do anything for prevention or mitigation. In other words, there exists a gap between their attitude and practice, which provides some space to intervene.

Because of centuries old isolation and tribal/feudal system, the fatalist attitude is being perpetually reinforced. And the Mullahs – the clergy – play an important role in this regard. However, clergy acts in collaboration with feudal and state officials. Any act that they perceive could endanger to the status quo is suppressed either through community pressure at best or by coercion at worst.

Because of this, the people are highly likely to behave as their ancestor had. The biggest barriers are as follows:

- (1) fatalist attitude of local people;
- (2) isolation and marginalisation;
- (3) lack of local organisation/leadership that can challenge feudal/tribal lords; and

(4) nexus of corrupt officials and elected representatives.

Two major lessons may be drawn from this case study as well as from our similar work.

First, based on experiences of a number of similar situations, one may draw some generalisations (but never let these generalisations blind you when considering new situations. Like no two human's looks are alike, no two situations are same). Therefore, understanding local context, class formation, social dynamics, internal politics/actors, cultural practices and attitudes is essential.

For instance, though large landlords do not interfere in the day-to-day affairs of communities, their local supporters keep them informed about critical developments. The same is true of local administration. In this regard, the role of media is extremely critical. Any coverage in the media could shake both the feudal/tribal chiefs who happen to be MPs and government officials. And the best way to attract media coverage is by holding a demo, a sit-in, etc.

After the 2010 mega floods, Pattan organised affected people across Pakistan under the banner of Tehreek Bahalia Sailabzadgan – Movement for the Rehabilitation of Flood Affectees.

Thousands of people joined the movement, held demos and sit-in in front of prime minister's house. When the Supreme Court of Pakistan constituted a Commission of Inquiry [5], the leaders of this movement were asked to appear for recording their grievances. The case study of this movement is being recorded. Regarding reaching to or taking communities to the tipping point, the role of the external catalyst is essential to understand. In my experience, civil society organisations could play the role of a catalyst. As far as this case study is concerned, our role was minimal. The fall of spur and the media coverage forced the authorities to respond promptly. One may argue that the situation forced the authorities to a tipping point. In our view, the government officials had failed to perform their duty.

Second, a more organised and close-knit community is likely to respond to disasters more effectively as well as being in a position to influence officials for response. Ahmadis' quick settlement is a good example in this regard.

Finally, in the absence of a welfare state, citizens are forced to rely on primordial networks, and these networks reinforce customary attitudes – misogyny, tribalism, subservience, etc.

Challenges for NGOs

The availability of funding is essential even for social mobilisation and motivation and for writing a case study too. Initially, we relied on our local contacts and received broken information from them. Hence, the case study remained incomplete. Finally, we travelled more than 700 miles to reach to the area. We visited the area along with Pattan staff, observed and discovered new developments.

The future

Based on our 24-year long experience of working in riverine belt and its communities, including the people of Basti Rindan, we could anticipate the following: those who own land within the boundaries of the Basti are likely to comeback, as hope has been built with the construction of spurs. Those who were landless and poor have already settled or struggling to settle across the district and some of them have already moved to urban areas. Those who had some savings or are well connected have bought or obtained houses in Rukh Dhol, a so-called model colony (see Plate 1) situated about seven miles far from the Basti.

Ahmadis – constitutionally declared non-Muslims and highly discriminated community – have built their own village named Nasirpur Colony, which is only half a mile away from the old Basti. In the past, they lived

side by side to the Muslims. Hence, they enjoyed tranquillity. But, this separation (ghettoization) has weakened that old interaction and reciprocity. In an environment where so much hate against Ahmadis is spread, every day could make them vulnerable. Since, Ahmadis do not vote in any elections as a protest,



Plate 1. Protest demo along riverbank where erosion is taking place near Basti Rindan, held against sitting MPs and landlords

and the local development and social services are provided on the basis of the weight of a community's vote bank, they may not get social services and utilities for some time. The electricity lines pass through the village but no house has the connection.

Regarding future work, there is a need to undertake transformative conscientisation work in order to weaken fatalist mind-set and to build social cohesion across sects and religions.

In order to bring changes in power structures, there is a need to build coalition of all marginalised groups. The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees equal rights including right to speech and association to all citizens, and as in cities, marginalised groups have more space to organise around their rights and media concentration is deeper, building pressure for rule of law is relatively easy. Therefore, building linkages with marginalised rural communities is

imperative to strengthen a coalition of the oppressed in order to weaken the nexus of the corrupt officials and the feudal elite and their misuse of clergy including local tribal leaders and this is doable through sustained work. Sadly, all the primordial structures have become tools in the hands of the powerful. Through sustained external intervention and by building linkages with urban-based institutions, primordial structures could be democratised.

Post script

On 5 February, after a couple of months of my last visit to the area, yet another group of communities situated just 30 kilometres downstream of Basti Rindan facing land erosion held a protest rally against the government, local landlords and MPs for not doing anything to stop the riverbank erosion in their area despite numerous complaints. The rally took place along the riverbank. A large number of farmers participated in the rally. They also said that these chiefs have been in power for many decades, but they have never tried to fulfil educational, health and other development needs of the people. Reportedly, they also pledged that they would never vote again for tribal chiefs and large landlords in the forthcoming general elections. A couple of local councillors also participated in the protest demo. The participants also announced a series of dharnay (sit-ins) in front of the government offices, if the authorities fail to respond to their demand.

This worked. The commissioner, the deputy commissioner and chief engineer irrigation visited the site and promised to build spur. It is worth noting here that the general elections will take place in August 2018. A “miracle” of elite democracy!

Policy implications

Though landslide and mudslide are being categorised as disasters in the official list, riverbank erosion is not. Throughout the lengths and widths of all rivers of the country, riverine communities face some form of erosion. Resultantly, hundreds of families are deprived of homes, land and livelihoods each year. The country also lacks credible data on the issue. Therefore, there is a serious need to record and document all forms of riverbank erosion and then to formulate a policy to reduce this risk.

Notes

1. After six months in November 2017, the author went back to the area, i.e., talked to the people and visited spur sites. Moreover, the construction of a spur upstream of Basti Rindan riverbank erosion continues, though its speed is being halted.
2. After July 2017, although main road linking the area to district headquarters was paved, the road to the basti is still in poor condition.
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_districts_of_Pakistan_by_Human_Development_Index
4. On 28 July 2017, the Supreme Court disqualified and dismissed the Prime Minister Mr Nawaz Sharif. 5. http://pattan.org/v2/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Flood_Report.pdf

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