
“We should be resettled there”

O m e r A i j a z i



Artist: Tazeem Qayyum “Lure n Kill”

In August 2010, nearly one-fifth of Pakistan was submerged under water. Roughly, an area the size of England was flooded, disrupting the lives of some 20 million individuals. The most severely affected were small-scale farmers, unskilled labourers and those already lacking the protective guarantees of a stable livelihood, according to various UN reports, the organization called the monsoon floods the “worst natural disaster in recent memory.”

Once the floods happened, a host of international organizations rushed to help including the arms of the United Nations as well as humanitarian non-profits such as Oxfam, CARE and ACTED. While their work was laudable, it also produced a familiar

humanitarian narrative of victims who need to be “saved” though outside technical intervention. Existing disaster discourse generally privileges de-politicized, technical solutions to otherwise political and social phenomenon of disasters—a narrative that ties in neatly with the global will to govern and intervene. This form of humanitarian discourse typically frames natural disasters as ruptures in a linear formation of modernity, which then, seem to call for global intervention.

It’s also a discourse that is often at odds with more local understandings and practices to cope with such disasters. The experiences of disaster survivors counter the narrative of hapless Third World victims who are without agency. By making these experiences *visible*, one can begin to disrupt the image of Pakistan—and by



extension Pakistanis—as failed people of a failed state.

Maintaining precarity

In 2010, while working for the international humanitarian system in Pakistan and feeling utterly frustrated at the scope of conversations permitted within humanitarian circles, I captured the landscape in the district of Thatta near the bustling city of Karachi.

The photograph depicts a brick kiln, ominously looming over a flooded village-scape. Brick kilns are sites of generational servitude and indentured labor in Pakistan and much of the South Asian region. According to the Global Slavery Index 2013, Pakistan ranks third behind Mauritania and Haiti for a high prevalence of modern slavery in the form of indentured labor. The report estimates that

there are at least 1.8 million individuals in bonded labor in the country. Other sources, such as the non-governmental organization Bonded Labor Front estimates this number to be as high as 20 million. In his book *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, Kevin Bale estimates that there are at least 750,000 individuals working in brick kilns across rural Pakistan. He traces the growth and development of these kilns to events such as the Pakistan-India Partition, mechanization of agriculture and land reforms, which resulted in large amounts of surplus labor and reconciles these events with rapid growth of urban infrastructure and capitalism. However, it is also important to consider other social forces such as climate change resulting in crop failure and the lack of equitable labor laws as being important contributors to the

rise and perpetuation of indentured labor in brick kilns.

Humanitarian interventions in this region focused on various forms of livelihood restoration and food security, but the brick kiln

allowed aid agencies unencumbered access to victims of war and natural disasters. Yet, it has also helped maintain the structural conditions of risk and precarity by de-limiting its scope and handling disasters without engagement with the politics that leave so many at the brink.

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and its systemic complicity within cycles of generational servitude and slavery remained unchallenged. In other words, the structural relations that produced the conditions of precarity that left so many exposed to the worst of the floods went unspoken and un-discussed. For humanitarian discourse, the brick kiln— and what it represented — was deemed by humanitarian agencies in the region as being complex and political, beyond the permissible ambit of the aid agencies. Several years later when I visited the same location, the waters had receded, but the kiln remained. The imagination of humanitarian work as neutral and one that maintains independence from any political inclination has

But as the work of several scholars has shown, natural disasters *are* political events, and their consequences are exacerbated by deep standing structural inequities and conditions of structural violence. According to a report by the World Bank and the Earth Institute, 3.4 billion people live in areas at risk of “natural” disasters. It is estimated that while only 11 percent of the total population that is exposed to such disasters lives in developing countries, that population accounts for nearly 53 percent of reported deaths.

Therefore, natural disasters can be conceptualized as not only the result of geophysical extremes but as functions of ongoing social orders, human-environment relations, and historical structural processes.

This incommensurability between the apolitical mandate of humanitarianism and the rather political nature of natural disasters raises questions of the efficacy and usefulness of such an articulation of humanitarian assistance.

An ordinary resistance

In 2012, two years after the monsoon floods, I returned to flood affected villages in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province (KP), this time as a researcher. I asked the residents why they thought that the floods affected their particular communities so adversely?

Respondents seldom understood the flooding as a mere natural event or a catastrophe from Allah (an almost expected and rather stereotypical response), but instead tied the causes of the flooding to much broader understandings of social justice, inequity and power relations.

For example, residents recognized the unsuitable geography of their current village locations, its lack of infrastructure and isolation from existing rural and urban networks as exacerbating the impacts of the flooding. They were also aware of the availability of public land in the nearby vicinity, which they felt to be prime land, ideal for re-settlement. Participants of a group interview reported:

“There is a 300 acre fruit farm near our village. It is public land and is managed by the military. They have been managing it for a long time. It was previously owned by the Angraiz [British] and handed to the military after they left [after decolonization]. We should be resettled there [instead of living on this marginal land], it is prime land. It is fenced off

and barricaded, we can't even enter it.”

However re-settlement was not part of the humanitarian agenda in this particular disaster response. The focus instead was to make existing habitats marginally safer, and therefore, once again maintaining the precarity of everyday life. For example, residents were instructed on raising the foundations of their homes to prevent flood waters from entering and sandbagging open drains to prevent them from overflowing. Within the vocabulary offered by the humanitarian response, there was no articulation of the option of resettlement or redistribution of public lands for the welfare of disrupted communities.

Similarly other residents cited insufficient drainage attributed to a failure of municipal services and by extension a failure of the state. Some residents of low lying villages reported that the recently completed Islamabad-Peshawar motorway was responsible for the inundation of their villages, since some sections of the motorway were elevated and prevented the natural drainage of water. Here is one instance from a group discussion conducted in July 2012:

“There was lots of rain. It rained a lot in Swat, there was thunder; the mountains split and water came gushing down. River Kabul overflowed into River Jindhi. The water then had nowhere to go, the elevation of the motorway [highway] made it worse and blocked the natural

passageway of water and it came gushing into our homes. The raging water also broke the levies.”

When residents were asked to identify one key factor that hampered their ability to restart their lives two years after the flooding, they often cited their inability to regain their livelihoods in real meaningful ways as an important reason. For example, residents who relied on micro-practices of bee keeping and honey production spoke about how their livelihoods were destroyed. And, they gestured towards the system that kept perpetuated their precarity. One said:

“The traditional occupation of this village is bee keeping. While we lost most of our bees and equipment, we are slowly returning back. The wholesale dealers buy honey from us. They first come, inspect our honey and they rate it [according to quality]. They price it extremely low, and export it at high prices to the Middle East particularly to Saudi Arabia. There are very few wholesalers who come to our village, maybe 7-8 so we cannot bargain, also because we produce so little. Wholesale buyers purchase from us at Rs.400/kg, they sell it in the local markets at Rs.1000/kg and in Saudi Arabia it goes for Rs.4000/

kg. They nit-pick on the quality of our honey and find faults with it. At the end we feel forced to sell it to them at their stated prices”

The quote refers to the exploitation of small scale honey producers by profit-motivated oligopolies, within the supply chain of an otherwise profitable honey export setup, and highlights the inability of these villagers to equitably tap into the free market sensibility. These residents received no government or humanitarian aid that would assist them in negotiating fairer wages for their work. Therefore, communities comprehended the 2010 floods as the amplification of daily structural constraints and hardships they routinely faced. They understood the flooding as a *socially constructed* process and linked the seemingly discrete natural event with the immediacy of their everyday lives.

They also responded to the crises through several small, everyday political acts. The majority of the residents of the villages I visited after the floods were small scale tenant farmers living in temporary housing on their landlord's land. Typically, tenants are barred from constructing more permanent or *pakka* houses. Instead, they live in makeshift or *katcha* homes, the temporality of which reflects their unequal stature within the village setting. Such a living arrangement also enables the landlord to maintain control over his tenants who face a constant threat of eviction. However, during the course of our interaction and as our intimacy grew, residents shared their strategies of a quiet

encroachment of the built environment revealing rows of forbidden bricks concealed beneath layers of mud or clay and roofs partially bolstered with cement. By engaging in small, hardly noticeable incremental changes

politics contests and counters the construction of the subjugated, de-humanized victim. Moreover, these acts by ordinary people indicate their agency and political aspirations — people that humanitarian discourses would

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to their *katcha* homes, residents revealed that they were able to achieve a semblance of permanence, control and pride over their lives and dwellings.

are now conceptualized as being abnormally prone to natural disasters. Akin to offering the cures of modern medicine and international development, Western nations have legitimized themselves as rightful interveners via the allegedly neutral “scientific” technologies of disaster management. Yet, rather than being neutral, these interventions reproduce a depoliticizing ethos, which limits the intent, nature and scope of humanitarian interventions. Humanitarian systems, as exemplified by the 2010 Pakistan flood response, are typically invested in instituting incremental changes in the everyday lives of survivors, allowing them to marginally negotiate various oppressive structures and conditions of precarity. In short, the motivation of humanitarian systems is to allow for survival

Formal institutional politics alone cannot account for the range of politics, agency and acts of resistance embedded within the everyday lives of disrupted populations such as flood survivors. In her article, “The Humanitarian Condition: Palestinian Refugees and the Politics of Living,” the anthropologist Ilana Feldman has drawn attention to the politics of living, defining it as the “non-institutionalized, everyday forms of political life: small-scale efforts at making claims and seeking to make change in the conditions of one’s existence.” An attention to the everyday and the ordinary form of activities and micro-

— not social transformation. An exploration of the lived experiences of flood survivors, however, reveals that despite their persistent subjugation and exploitation, they read their own plight as the consequence of social and political processes, and they negotiate those processes through everyday acts of politics and resistance to further their lives in self-identified meaningful ways. ■

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