

# Natural Disasters amidst Political Crisis: The 2014 Flood in Kashmir

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This paper explores the political impact of the 2014 floods in the contentious and conflict-prone Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The September 2014 floods were the most serious natural disaster in the state in the past sixty years, and affected some two million people in the Kashmir valley. Drawing on qualitative interview evidence from fifty flood victims in south, central and north Kashmir, the paper examines the extent to which the disaster transformed existing political narratives. In doing so, it examines the role of the state and central governments, the army, local volunteers, and the media. The paper concludes that the political impact of the floods was limited, but that it provided a brief, revealing glimpse of social and political realities.

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## 1. Introduction

Are natural disasters moments of political rupture, or of continuity? Do they provide an opportunity for deeply etched political narratives and relationships to be transcended and transformed? Or are they better understood as moments of clarity, in which society is rendered painfully and embarrassingly visible in its bare form? This paper engages with these and other related questions by drawing on personal narratives drawn from victims of the 2014 floods in Jammu & Kashmir. We conducted fifty in-depth interviews with a cross-section of flood victims in the Kashmir valley in which people spoke at length about their experience of the floods, the circumstances of their rescue, the agencies that were visible in relief and rehabilitation, their sense of loss, and their impressions of the role of various actors involved.

The 2014 floods in Jammu & Kashmir were by far the most serious natural disaster in living memory in the state, and directly affected two million people. Heavy monsoon

rains for five consecutive days led to landslides and rising water levels that completely inundated thousands of villages and large parts of the state capital Srinagar under fifteen or more feet of water. Hundreds of thousands were displaced by the floods for up to a month, often returning to find their houses destroyed and assets lost.

The widespread destruction wrought by the floods inevitably intersected with the intense political contentions and divisions on the ground. Jammu and Kashmir is a divided and disputed territory, the subject of rival international claims and wars fought between India and Pakistan. In the Muslim-majority Kashmir valley, which falls in the Indian part of the state, there is widespread and open hostility to Indian rule, and deep resentment towards its security forces. This stems on the one hand from the larger unresolved, and long-festering political problem that is a legacy of the disputed incorporation of the state into India in 1947. Kashmiris are very conscious of their politically ambiguous status, and aspire for a final political resolution to the dispute. But on the other hand, anger at the Indian state also has a sharper, more recent edge that stems from the unhealed scars of the brutal militancy and counter-insurgency period of the early 1990s, in which an unknown number of people – assumed to be in the tens of thousands were killed, tortured, or disappeared (Schofield 1996, Bose 2003, Ganguly 2003).

Armed militancy has subsided significantly since it peaked in 2002, and the everyday security situation for civilians has improved significantly. Yet the relationship between the state and people has remained tense and prone to breakdown. Kashmiris reject Indian rule, view the security forces as an alien army of occupation, and are scornful of local electoral politics as an instrument of this. Yet the manifest impossibility of changing this painful reality means that anger and anguish feed bitterness and impotent rage. Even isolated incidents of violence involving the security forces spark valley-wide protests for several days. In 2009 there was a wave of protests over the rape and murder of two young women in the southern district of Shopian. In 2010, there was an even longer and more protracted wave of unrest and ‘stone pelting’ in which over one hundred people were killed. In 2013, the valley erupted in protests for days over the execution of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri convicted for the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament (Kak 2011, Duschinski and Hoffman 2011, Fazili 2014).

As such Kashmir has been locked in a state of wounded abnormality for so long that the extraordinary has become routinized a part of the ordinary. People factor frequent disruptions into the coping strategies of normal life. Everyday forms of resistance against the status quo coexist alongside the everyday necessity to collaborate with it. It is this context that forms the point of departure to understand the 2014 floods: the crisis caused by a natural disaster was layered on over what was an extended, pre-existing political crisis.

What would the political consequences of this be? In Kashmir as in other such cases, the disaster created a brief moment in which established relationships, hierarchies, rivalries and patterns of life were temporarily suspended, shaken, and disturbed. As is often cited in the case of post-tsunami Aceh (Gaillard et al 2008), the disaster bears new possibilities for actors to transcend the past, envision ground-realities anew, and

forge transformative relationships. Indeed, all the main actors involved– the army, state government, national government, state and national media, pro-independence politicians, local and national volunteer organizations, NGOs, and Kashmiri civilians – already had long histories of interaction and were, because of the circumstances, forced to relate and consider one another in different ways.

But this optimistic scenario of conflict transformation through a political unlocking is far from common. As Olson (2000:159) points out, natural disasters are agenda control and accountability crises for public officials. They serve more frequently to arouse public anger at governments over their failures, and give rise to widely circulated narratives about incompetence and indifference, or to the politicized and partisan distribution of relief. The frustration, anger, and the deepening of political animosities thus also result in focused political mobilizations that have the potential to transform state-society relations.

In South Asia, the most politically significant natural disaster in contemporary times was the East Pakistan cyclone of November 1970. Several hundred thousand people were killed in the disaster, and the aftermath proved to be an extraordinary political juncture. Public anger at the inaction and apathy of the West Pakistan-dominated government towards the disaster played a critical role in deepening the divisions between two wings of the country and eventually in its break-up shortly afterwards (Sisson and Rose 1991).

What then was the political impact of the 2014 floods in Kashmir? There has been a growing body of research in recent years on the politics of natural disasters that seeks to explain their impact and consequences in terms of the human social context rather than its physical geography (Wisner et al 2004, Albala-Bertrand 1993, Olson 2000, Pelling and Dill 2006, Guggenheim 2014). Within this, there are five important clusters of writing that warrant closer attention in framing the Kashmir floods.

Firstly, disasters serve as a moment of political revelation. As Cuny (1983: 54) writes ‘disasters often highlight the social struggles in a society and underscore the inherent inequities within a political system’. Similarly, Pelling and Dill (2006:4) explain how ‘The way in which the state and other sectors act in response and recovery is largely predicated on the kind of political relationships that existed between sectors before the crisis.’ The abrupt suspension of normal life lifts the veil and provides profound, raw, undisguised – and frequently very shocking - insights into the inner structures of that world. The relationship between state and society, tested under duress, becomes transparent in the public domain. The spontaneous rise of voluntarism, the dysfunctions of the state, the hypocrisy of the powerful, and the opportunism of politicians are all briefly and viscerally evident in their nakedness under conditions of emergency.

Secondly, and often as a consequence of the disturbing realities that they reveal, disasters become a focal point for public outrage and become moments of political rupture and reinvention. As Chhotray (2014) writes, ‘Disasters are key political moments in the life of a society’. Disaster politics have a particularly sharp effect on

the relationship between state and society, and raise fundamental questions about citizenship and state- society relations. It can catalyse what Pelling and Dell (2010) describe as ‘political tipping points’. Often born out of the anger and outrage at the inadequacy of government relief efforts, disasters rapidly coalesce political mobilisations that pose very fundamental questions and channel entirely new trajectories, including war and revolution. Authoritarian or insecure states can as a result view spontaneous collective action during disasters as a threat, and as in the earthquakes in Guatemala (1976), Chile (1985), or Turkey (1999), and seek to suppress or demobilize them (Pelling and Dell 2006).

At the heart of these larger political dynamics that follow natural disasters are the ways in which the provision of relief and the identification of blame and failure are established and translated through moral-cognitive frameworks. Those who have the capacity and willingness to provide relief can gain in legitimacy, gratitude, and public standing. The control of desperately needed resources also shifts power, and allows patrons to cultivate political loyalty, enhance clientelist networks, and gain electoral mileage. At the same time, it also does the converse, and delegitimizes those who are seen to be inactive, absent, or profiting from the misery of others. The political stakes in any disaster are thus high, and can have lasting consequences.

This means that conditions of emergency and abject human need are a moment of reinvention in which political success and failure can be forged. These politically pregnant possibilities are widely understood and closely observed among political actors in disaster-struck areas, so that alongside the competition to command and allocate resources is another, more frantic competition to shape public perceptions (Tierney and Bevc 2007).

This leads to the third point of engagement between disasters and politics: the social construction of disasters. Disaster, suffering, rescue, relief, and rehabilitation exist not just in terms of a fixed scientific and statistical reality of ecological change, body counts, and reconstruction costs, but in terms of processes of meaning-making through which people – its victims, interlocutors, administrators, and even distant voyeurs – grasp and come to terms with it. Predictably, the divided and contentious political environment in Kashmir produced very distinct meanings and claims about what really happened, and about who the heroes and villains of the disasters were. Among political contenders, there was a desperate competition underway to gain favourable media coverage, fashion public opinion, and construct narratives that shape the historical memory of the event.

Within the first few days of the floods in Kashmir, there were already competing and confusing claims about who was responsible for the tragedy, and who was directing rescue operations and providing relief. There were widespread complaints on the ground that the state government was ineffective and absent. Media reports, particularly from the New Delhi-based national media, tended to emphasize the positive role of the Indian armed forces, and to suggest that this had transformed their relationship with the Kashmiri people. Interview responses instead suggested that local volunteers played a much more important role, and that the floods had if

anything reinforced the mistrust and bitterness among the public toward the state apparatus.

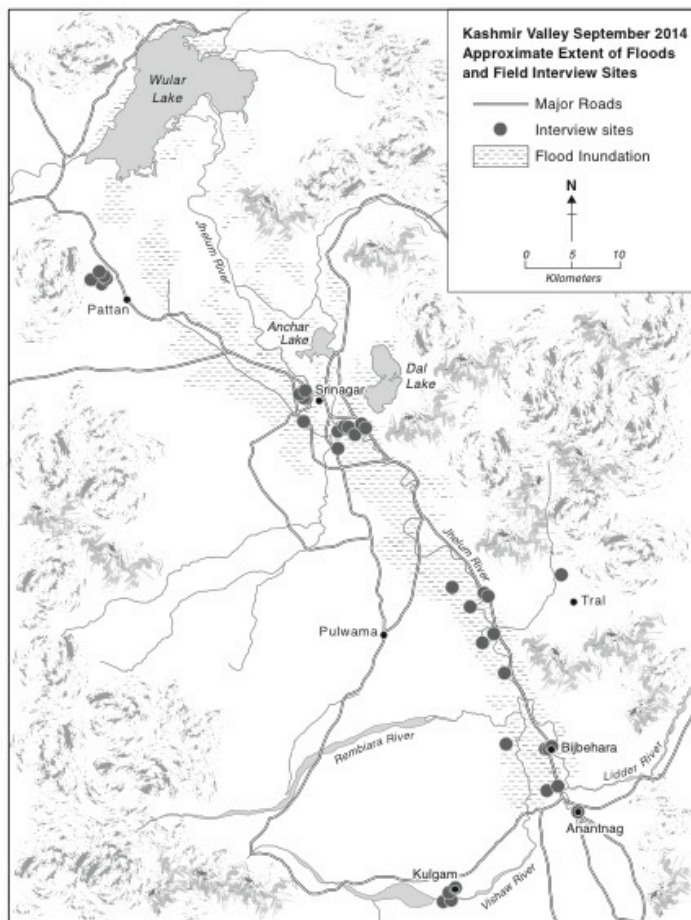
Numerous other political actors in the valley also sought to frame the disaster within their own political compulsions. The parliamentary opposition parties in the state, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were sharply critical of the failures of the National Conference (NC) led government of Chief Minister Omar Abdullah. The separatist leaders of the Hurriyat Conference, Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq made a number of public statements criticising the Indian government for its disinterest in the floods, the prioritization of tourists and senior politicians in rescue missions, and the refusal to allow international humanitarian aid. The Pakistan-based chief of the United Jihad Council (UJC), Syed Salahuddin, while criticizing the role of the Indian government, also announced a suspension of militant operations in sympathy with the affected people of Kashmir (Rising Kashmir 01.10.14).

In other words, the analysis of the political consequences of natural disasters must take into account a model that is more complicated than that of a linear causal effect from natural disaster to political outcomes such as tipping points. What complicates the model is that it also operates as the cognitive framework of political actors on the ground. All those who are conscious of the political profit to be reaped from a disaster will seek to anticipate, pre-empt, and influence events, images, and narratives in the hope of instrumentalising the disaster to their advantage.

Given the role of failed relief in destabilising state-society relationships, there is an important fourth arena of research on the politics of disasters that examines the role of the donor, and the significance of the donor-recipient relationship. Korf (2007), Korf et al (2010), and Ruwanpura and Hollenbach (2010) highlight the deep ambivalence and problematic nature of relief and reconstruction aid. In cases where the gift of aid and differences in power or status preclude any possibility of reciprocity, it creates a social debt. Relief and reconstruction aid as unrequited gifts carry within them the increased standing of the giver, and the deeper obligation of the receiver. It means that the recipient acquiesces and accepts his/her inferior position in the social hierarchy, and becomes complicit in its reproduction, so that rather than transcending the past, disasters perpetuate and reinforce it.

This fifth dimension of the politics of disasters thus relates to this issue of relief and reconstruction as a nationalist political project of state. Hasbullah and Korf (2009) describe how the reconstruction of Sri Lanka's east coast after the tsunami involved an intensification of the project of ethnic 'purification'. Corbridge and Simpson (2006) describe how the memorialization and reconstruction after the Bhuj earthquake was deeply infused by Hindu nationalism. But nationalism operates not just as a political project from above: it equally affects the personal ethics and moral framework that guide volunteerism, as Sabhlok's (2010) ethnography of aid workers in Gujarat explores.

The agenda of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, it draws upon survivor narratives from the floods to distill out a reconstruction of some key elements of the disaster as it unfolded. As Ed Simpson describes of the Bhuj earthquake, disaster narratives are written largely from above and outside (Simpson 2013). This paper seeks instead to find out how its victims experienced it and how they are trying to emerge from it. It provides a series of snapshots of the tragic circumstances of the flooding, destruction, rescue, and relief in a way that can address some basic questions at dispute about the role of different actors. Secondly, it draws on people's experiences and perceptions to engage with the broader political implications of the disaster and its aftermath and to evaluate its legacy.



We collected fifty survivor narratives with in-depth interviews in the valley from some of the main flood-affected districts of Kulgam, Pulwama, Anantnag in south Kashmir, Srinagar in the centre, and Baramulla in the north. Overall there were four interviews from Kulgam, eight from Anantnag, eight from Pulwama, 18 from Srinagar, and 12 from Baramulla. Thirteen interviewees were women and the remainder thirty seven were men. Interviews were conducted between early October and mid November 2014 in the aftermath of the floods as people were returning to find their homes, and in the period before the state election campaign started. Interviewees were selected in a non-random manner through snowballing contact methods to arrive at a

purposive sample that covered a broad cross-section of society in the valley. By doing so, we hoped to capture some of the commonalities and differences in narratives across geographical and class divides. The interviewees included relatively wealthy social and business elites in affluent parts of Srinagar, lower middle class shopkeepers, public sector employees such as teachers, and the rural poor, including marginal farmers, half-widows (wives of the disappeared), small shopkeepers, and retirees living on small pensions.

We approached the interviews with a broad and open-ended series of questions that asked people to describe the circumstances of the disaster, the nature of their escape from the floods, the identity of those that came to their assistance, the extent of relief, the nature of the losses suffered, and their reflections on the role of various actors from the media to the army. In general we found that people were very willing to respond and spoke at length, often passionately. The stories they narrated were often extraordinary, poignant, and at times, disturbing. But they were not unusual given the enormity of the tragedy and the hundreds of thousands of people who were affected. Interviews were conducted mostly in homes, in Kashmiri, and were subsequently translated into English.

In analyzing the responses, we found that there were important narratives that converged, which are expanded on below in terms of five broad clusters. These are (i) the suddenness of the disaster, the lack of warning, and the unpreparedness for its extent; (ii) the paralysis and absence of the state; (iii) the role of local youth, voluntary organisations and local social networks; (iv) unfairness in rescue, relief provision and prioritization; (v) anger at national media coverage of the floods. The rest of the paper dwells on these five clusters, situates them within their context, and concludes with a discussion of the political repercussions of the floods.

## **2. Deluge and Loss**

*It looked like doomsday. God should never show that day again. In the 51 years of my life I have never seen water being so angry it just wanted to take away what ever came on its way. [Interview 43: Kulgam]*

From 2-6 September 2014, heavy monsoon rains occurred across the Kashmir valley, triggering landslides and flooding across the state. In particular, an arc of heavy rain hit the southern part of the valley and the adjoining hill districts of Poonch, Rajouri, Reasi, and Ramban amounting to as much as ten times the normal rainfall in that period. By 3 September, the water level at the Sangam bridge near Bijbehara had crossed the danger mark as the main southern tributaries of the Jhelum - the Rembiara, Vishaw, Brengi, Kuthar, and Sandran had already risen high enough to flood parts of the valley.

Heavy rains continued until 6 September, and river water levels peaked on 8 September, after which it receded and drained slowly over the next three weeks. In the valley, a total 557 km<sup>2</sup> of land was inundated, directly affecting villages and towns occupied by two million people, or almost forty percent of the total population of the valley. In total, 268 people died as a result of the floods. In the affected parts of the Kashmir valley, which is the focus of this study, there were relatively fewer deaths compared to Poonch, Rajauri, and Reasi in Jammu district, which suffered serious landslides and flash flooding. But as the economic and administrative hub of the state, with the bulk of its population, the impact was far greater in the valley in terms of the number of people displaced, houses damaged, crops destroyed, and productive enterprises lost.

In the rural areas of south Kashmir, entire villages and thousands of acres of farmlands were submerged. In some villages, virtually every house and structure had crumbled in the torrent, leaving very little behind. The famous agricultural products of the state – the apple and the saffron crop suffered enormous losses estimated between Rs 600 Cr - Rs 1000 Cr (US\$ 100 million – \$160 million). In the capital Srinagar alone, some 73,000 houses were damaged or destroyed, as many parts of the city remained under 14 feet of water for days. People in the flooded areas were either forced to flee their homes in the face of a rising torrent, or else were stranded awaiting rescue, without food, water, or communication for days.

Most people remained displaced or in distressed conditions for the next three weeks, and it was only by 1 October that water levels receded to the point where they were able to return and inspect the damage. At the time of the interviews, which took place in October-November, flood waters had receded entirely, but large numbers of flood victims remained in acute distress, struggling to confront the enormity of the financial and human loss they had suffered. As a young man from Srinagar described 'The mental trauma, the stress that we have suffered can't be understood in any way' [Interview 11: Bemina, Srinagar].

The geography and ecology of the Kashmir valley have historically rendered it prone to periodic flooding by the River Jhelum and its tributaries (Koul 1978). In recent years, Kashmir experienced floods in 1992, 1996, and 2006. Historical sources on Kashmir from the earliest kingdoms to the Mughal and Afghan periods have numerous accounts of flooding and its effects on the valley (Kaw 1996). Sir Walter Roper Lawrence's classic travelogue from 1895, *The Valley of Kashmir* also mentions the many disastrous floods that he encountered in vernacular histories, including the terrible inundation of 879 A.D. He himself experienced the floods of 1893 and wrote of its terrible cost: 'In 1893 the floods cost the State Rs 64,802 in land revenue alone, 25,426 acres under crops were submerged, 2,225 houses were wrecked and 329 cattle killed (Lawrence 1895: 207).

This natural predisposition of the Kashmir valley to periodic floods notwithstanding, disasters are not entirely natural phenomena and are profoundly shaped by the human environment, both in terms of causation and impact. As Wisner et al (2004: 4-5) note, disasters 'are also the product of social, political and economic environments.

*... These involve the manner in which assets income and access to other resources such as knowledge and information are distributed between different social groups, and various forms of discrimination that occur in the allocation of welfare and social protection (including relief and resources for recovery).*

As with many other heavily populated, flood-prone Himalayan areas, the ecological and geographical vulnerability of the valley to floods has been aggravated by recent anthropogenic causes that have increased its intensity and impact. Aside from the global-level concerns about climate change, the local factors have to do with changes in land use patterns such as increased construction on the floodplain, deforestation in upper catchment areas, the shrinkage of wetlands in lower areas, and poor flood management. These changing land use patterns are closely interwoven with economic, social, and political trajectories, so that any account of the Kashmir floods must necessarily take these factors into account not just in its consequences, but in its causation.

### 2.1 Surprise

*My son had not even put his slippers.*  
[Interview 35: Kulgam]

Despite the long history of floods, and the particular vulnerability of the valley, the 2014 floods were remarkable for their magnitude and breadth of damage. In a short space of time, a large part of the population suddenly lost their homes, all their personal possessions, livestock, crops, tools, economic assets, and important documents. People recounted ‘a catastrophe never seen before’ [Interview 35: Kulgam]. A young man in Srinagar said ‘I literally don’t have words to describe that disaster of nature [Interview 6: Srinagar]’. It was ‘the worst thing that has ever happened to us ... we lost everything [Interview 36: Srinagar]’. Others talked of how, once they reached safety, they watched from a distance in distress as their houses were gradually inundated and then collapsed.

What also stands out about the Kashmir floods of 2014 is the lack of an early warning system, the extent of unpreparedness for the disaster, and the surprise with which people were consequently forced to confront it. Most people remained in their homes until the very last minute as waters rose, by which time they were either trapped inside, or else were forced to escape because their homes were collapsing. The lack of advance warning or timely evacuation has had a clear impact on the extent of human suffering and economic loss that resulted.

Unlike the flash floods and landslides of the mountainous parts of Rajouri or Poonch, which took place without much warning on the first two days, the floods in the valley spread relatively slowly from south to north. The high flood waters of the Jhelum and its tributaries took five days to make the 120 kilometre journey from south to north: Pulwama was submerged on Wednesday 3 September, Anantnag on Friday 5

September, Srinagar on Saturday 6 September, and Baramulla on 9 September. Yet it took the authorities and people of each newly flooded area by surprise and without preparation.

On 3 September, a farmer from Kulgam recounted, 'When we woke up there was water all around ... we were not expecting such large scale damage' [Interview 43: Kulgam]. Two days later, when Anantnag, some 20 kilometres away was flooded, a businessman described how it 'caught people unaware' [Interview 41: Anantnag]. Four days after this, and just 80 kilometres away when the floods reached Pattan, a family of carpet weavers similarly recounted their shock at how 'water burst into the house all of a sudden at 5am' [Interview 24: Pattan].

In the rural areas of Kulgam, Anantnag, and Pulwama districts, which were affected in the first two days, large areas of agricultural lands were flooded, and people fled homes and villages on foot because their houses were destroyed by the height and force of the current. In Srinagar, where better-built two or three story concrete houses were able to withstand the floods, most people found themselves trapped in the second floor or roof of their houses. Virtually all of the households interviewed in the affected parts of Srinagar spent between three days to two weeks trapped in their houses with little water or food.

As a result of the lack of warning or early evacuation, people responded only at the very last minute, under emergency conditions, often in the middle of the night. In Srinagar, there was a very sudden escalation of water levels in the early hours of 7 September, trapping a large portion of the one million residents of the city inside their houses. A family from Indra Nagar described how a 12 foot high tide of water first entered their house at 4am, after which 'in seven minutes the ground floor was inundated' [Interview 1: Srinagar]. Another household in Bemina described: 'Our ground floor got inundated in just half an hour' [Interview 10: Srinagar].

The surprise element of the floods in the valley had three serious consequences. Firstly, the lack of preparedness resulted in enormous, and to some extent preventable financial loss. Although much of the damage, particularly to agricultural crops and houses could not have been prevented even with early warning, the loss of movable equipment, tools, raw materials, and finished goods suffered by businessmen, shop-keepers, and artisans as well as a great deal of personal property and household possessions could well have been reduced with better warning.

The floods also occurred during the traditional wedding season in Kashmir (Rising Kashmir 05.09.14, p.3) as a result of which there was one widely reported tragedy in which an entire wedding bus party of fifty people were washed away and killed in Rajouri (Rising Kashmir 05.09.14, p.1). Beyond this, it also meant that many families lost large amounts of expensive ceremonial material, often amounting to several hundred thousand rupees, such as clothes and jewellery which had been stored in their homes. A barber from Kulgam described: 'My daughter was getting married next month all the preparation had been completed. All those objects were washed away in front of my eyes' [Interview 43: Kulgam].

Secondly, it meant that families with elderly or infirm members with medical conditions had great difficulty in escaping the floods, getting evacuated, or in accessing regular medication. A shopkeeper from Kursoo Rajbagh in Srinagar described: 'My father is blind, we had great difficulty in evacuating him' [Interview 4: Srinagar]. A school teacher from Pulwama explained that 'my father is paralyzed since last nine years. [He] couldn't take medicines for many days because all the medicines were washed away and they were not able to buy new medicines' [Interview 17: Pulwama; also interview 18: Pulwama]. Other respondents described similar problems of elderly heart patients and diabetics suffering without medication for days [Interviews 8 & 9: Srinagar].

Thirdly, many families were separated in the circumstances, and due to the collapse of cellular telephone networks, remained without contact with one another for days or weeks. A middle class family from Srinagar described 'We were out of touch from my father and brother and it was only after a month that we were able to contact each other.' A half-widow who lost contact with her son for eleven days spoke of this and described: 'Later we found him in a different camp ... I only know how we managed to spend those days without him' [Interview 2: Srinagar]. Overall, seven of the fifty families interviewed, predominantly from urban Srinagar lost contact with one or more household member for an extended period.

## 2.2 Narratives of State Failure

*The government did not offer any help neither for rescuing us nor for the relief distribution.*  
[Interview 44: Anantnag].

Closely related to the lack of warning and preparation was a second narrative about the widespread collapse of all branches of the administration during the first two weeks of the flood. Across socio-economic status and geographical location, there was an overwhelming consensus among about the absence and incompetence of the state. This was to some extent what people expected, and the responses reflect pre-existing attitudes, albeit confirmed, and thus reproduced anew with fresh evidence.

As the then chief minister Omar Abdullah himself conceded in a television interview, 'I had no government... My secretariat, the police headquarters, the control room, fire services, hospitals, all the infrastructure was under water'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, large numbers of politicians, bureaucrats, and police were themselves trapped and in desperate circumstances. Many army camps including Srinagar's Badami Bagh cantonment were also heavily flooded, leading to an unusual absence of the normally heavy presence of

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<sup>1</sup> NDTV Interview with Barkha Dutt, 11 September 2014. Details at: <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/jammu-and-kashmir-floods-i-had-no-government-omar-abdullah-tells-ndtv-662622>. See also his later interview with Sameer Yasir. Firstpost 22 September 2014 'Our Government Wasn't Prepared to Deal with Floods Like These': <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/exclusive-our-govt-wasnt-prepared-to-deal-with-floods-like-these-says-omar-abdullah-1723475.html>

the security forces from the valley. A businessman from Anantnag described ‘there was no government agency active in the town for the first fifteen days’ [Interview 41: Anantnag].

A young middle class man from Srinagar explained:

*Police, army and central as well as state government was missing from the scene. The role they played during the whole scene was dismal and unexpected. The most unfortunate thing was that the army for the first four or five days instead of rescuing the common people was busy evacuating their own men and left the people in utter deluge.* [Interview 7: Srinagar].

An agricultural labourer from Tral who lost his house made a similar observation: ‘state government was itself helpless, central government reacted late, state police was not visible, army was trying to appease people with little help’ [Interview 47: Pulwama]. Other respondents did note the presence and the role of the army, and to a lesser extent, the National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF), who were active in particular areas such as Srinagar’s Shivpora, Rambagh, and Indra Nagar. There was however, no such appreciation extended to the state government from any of the respondents. Despite the personal efforts and frequent public appearances of the Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on the ground and on television, there was widespread criticism of the political, administrative, and law enforcement machinery.

A farmer from the village of Beighpora described how ‘the state government was almost missing in action, as if it did not exist’ [Interview 16: Pulwama]. A young woman from Anantnag whose father died of a heart attack while they were trapped and awaiting rescue spoke of how ‘the government machinery was defunct in rescuing people. Those who were rescued were left at the mercy of god’ [Interview 44: Anantnag]. A small shop-keeper from Kulgam noted that ‘State government was not active at all during this period of despair’ [Interview 45: Kulgam].

Urban middle class respondents from Srinagar, many of whom were themselves well-connected, and from families of senior civil servants, were equally critical of the government. They described how: ‘We saw no one from the State or Central Government’ [Interview 3: Srinagar]; ‘I didn’t see even a single government official in our area during or after the floods. Even our MLA concerned is yet to pay us a visit.’ [Interview 10: Srinagar]; ‘There was no sign of any government agency or any other government personnel being available for help. The government was missing and defunct’ [Interview 1: Srinagar]; ‘The government even failed to clean our link roads. The trash and residue was cleared a month later on the eve of Eid.’ [Interview 11: Srinagar].

### 2.3 Youth Volunteers

*I think I saw only one institution at work during the floods and that was the local volunteers.*

*None, else in my eyes has done anything*  
[Interview 9: Srinagar]

With the effective collapse of the state during the first few days of the flood, how then did hundreds of thousands of trapped people in the valley get rescued, and find relief? The evidence from our interviews, as well as a considerable body of supporting evidence from media, NGO and other observers, points towards the role of impromptu groups of local volunteers in their rescue, and in local NGOs, trusts, and charitable organisations for relief.

Flood victims also spoke of the role of the Indian army and India's National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF), who were active in many areas of Kashmir. A middle class woman from Kulgam described: 'people were rescued by locals and army without any bias ... army also provided some food and blankets' [45 Kulgam]. In Srinagar, we heard 'Most of the families in our area were evacuated by the NDRF teams' [8 Rambagh, Srinagar]; and 'We were rescued by the army... The rescue in our area was mainly done by army, NDRF and JK Police' [37 Indra Nagar, Srinagar].

But the role of the army was in reality limited in relation to the vast scale of the problem at hand. General D.S. Hooda, the northern army commander acknowledged this:

*The task in Srinagar was too enormous and whatever the relief agencies (army, air force NDRF) could do would still not be enough. This is where we have to acknowledge the efforts of local volunteers who have contributed immensely.* [First Post 26.09.14].

The only detailed account of the role of the Indian army during the floods that is publicly available is from an academic researcher who had the opportunity to interact and observe the army at close quarters. Vasundhara Sirinate describes how the army had indeed been very active in the first few days of the floods, but then stopped after rescue teams were pelted with stones:

*The 162nd Battalion was instrumental in much of the rescue effort, but all of it lasted barely nine days. After incidents of stone-pelting were reported, the rescue boats were stopped. Officers and soldiers did work long hours not only rescuing people but also sheltering them... Then the stone-pelting incidents happened, for reasons that lie at an intersection of politics and resistance, and the equation changed.* (Sirinate 2014)

Indeed, for the most part, Kashmir's trapped flood victims were rescued and provided for in their hour of need by other Kashmiris. The Indian army did play an important role, but one that was greatly exaggerated by the Indian media. Of our limited sample of 50 households, 27 left their houses and escaped the floods by themselves, and 5 stayed at home. Of the remaining 18 households who were actually rescued by others, 14 of these were attributed to local volunteers. Of the remaining four, only one family reported being rescued by the army, and one other by the NDRF, while the remaining two were rescued by their relatives. This confirms a wide body of anecdotal

evidence and media coverage on the ground, as well as the findings of an earlier study on the floods by a group of student volunteers which found that 96% of people in shelters reported being rescued by local volunteers (Rapid Assessment People's Report 2014). Media reports in the aftermath of the floods described how a group of 300 youth rescued 20,000 people (Rising Kashmir 22.09.14, p.2). Another report highlights the role of a group of young volunteers who rescued 1,500 villagers (Rising Kashmir 23.09.14, p.1).

Indeed, it was striking how respondents across class, geographical, and educational divides in the valley unanimously identified the ubiquitous youth volunteers as responsible for their safe evacuation. In the villages of south Kashmir, people described how 'Everyone in our locality was rescued by local volunteers and villagers who carried old aged people on their shoulders' [Interview 19: Anantnag]. In the nearby village of Batengoo, 'All the people were rescued by local people in small makeshift boats. There was no one else to help except these boys [Interview 44: Anantnag]. A barber from Kulgam who lost his house similarly recounted how 'Nobody visited our village during the times of flood. Only local people helped each other [Interview 43: Kulgam]. Even in the very different world of urban, educated, middle class respondents from the affluent suburbs of Srinagar, the message was strikingly similar and uniform: 'Had the local Kashmiri volunteers not helped, people would have died like animals' [Interview 1: Srinagar].

The role of local youth volunteers in the rescue has special political significance in the recent history of Kashmir. Young Kashmiri men from this very background have been at the centre of armed militancy and more recently, outbreaks of stone-pelting. They are as such, characterized as the archetypal 'angry young man' of Kashmir and are particularly at risk of scrutiny by the security forces. The transformation of the young Kashmiri male from angry militant to angel of mercy is rich with irony and meaning that was not lost on the respondents. A milk shop owner from Srinagar who lost his livelihood in the floods explained:

*All the family members were rescued by local volunteers from the old town. And these are the same boys whom the police calls stone pelters. I think had these boys not come with these hand made boats we all would have died slowly in our homes without food and water [Interview 12: Srinagar].*

Volunteer groups also appeared to be the most active in organizing relief and assistance to the large numbers of displaced people: 'The local volunteers from the old town did a tremendous job in arranging food and accommodation for people' [Interview 4: Srinagar]. Several respondents, particularly in Srinagar noted the role of activist from the separatist *Hurriyat* coalition, and particularly the woman's organization, *Dukhtaran-e-Millat* in providing relief to affected families.

While many respondents described rescue and relief efforts by the army, NDRF, NGOs such as Oxfam, Save the Children and Action Aid, and voluntary donations from other parts of India, there was an unmistakable emphasis and affection for local organisations. Alongside the local youth and Hurriyet activists, Kashmiri narratives of

the flood remembered local philanthropic donations, town organisations, or trusts such as the Yateem Trust or Agha Syed Yousuf Memorial Trust. Several respondents noted the role of Kashmiri student organisations in Delhi and elsewhere in India. A middle-aged labourer from Srinagar who had lost his ancestral property and all his documents spoke of how:

*People had come from far off districts like Baramulla, Ganderbal and Badipora to help others in the time of need. People boats, food, and utensils and bedding. Kashmir has never seen this kind of voluntarism [15 Rajbagh Srinagar].*

#### 2.4 Bias in Rescue and Relief

*The priority was first the politicians, then the bureaucrats, then the non-locals and the number of the common men came last in the last. [6 Kursoo Rajbagh, Srinagar].*

The politics of disaster relief revolves heavily around perceptions of unequal treatment and unfairness in rescue and relief provision. Victims of the Kashmir flood spoke of a number of complaints of unfair treatment, although it must be said that this was overall a minority opinion, and most respondents either did not speak of this issue, or did not find that there was any unfair treatment. On the whole, people were more disturbed by the incompetence and inadequacy of the government rather than by any bias. However, those that articulated their sense of biased relief provision fell within two distinct types, which were to some extent in contradiction with one another.

Firstly, a number of respondents from the villages of south Kashmir complained that media attention, relief, and rehabilitation assistance were being targeted to the urban, wealthier residents of Srinagar to their detriment. A disabled man from a village in Anantnag who suffered the collapse of this house in the floods explained:

*They only concentrated on the city without realizing that people also lived in villages, and they were also stranded too. There should have been efforts to save all the people of Kashmir not just people in Srinagar [Interview 23: Anantnag].*

A farmer from Dangerpora in Pulwama, whose village was completely submerged similarly said:

*All the relief material which came from outside was given to the people in Srinagar city. In villages people only got help from nearby villages. Majority of the parts from south Kashmir were flooded but those areas where flood had not come helped. [Interview 17: Pulwama].*

Others in south Kashmir attributed the problem variously to the concentration of national media attention, as well as army and NDRF deployment in Srinagar [Interviews 41: Anantnag; 22: Anantnag].

However, in Srinagar itself, people were oblivious to this issue, and instead complained of a different kind of bias they perceived towards tourists and influential people. A businessman charged that 'The priority was first the politicians, then the bureaucrats, then the non-locals, and the number of the common man came in the last. [Interview 6: Srinagar]. Another respondent spoke bitterly of how 'high level government officials, political affiliates, security and defense personnel as well as the tourists and outsiders were the prime priority of the rescuers all the time. We were left to fend for ourselves [Interview 36: Srinagar].

These accusations became widespread during the floods, and the Indian army commander General D.S. Hooda countered them publicly by arguing that a large part of the army personnel in charge of rescue and relief in Srinagar were Kashmiri themselves. 'Could we have issued orders to them to save non-Kashmiris first?' (First Post 26.09.14). At any rate, given the magnitude of the disaster, and the relatively modest role played by the army under those circumstances, it would seem reasonable to suggest that even if there was such bias in its behavior, that would in itself not have affected the outcomes for most people. The perception remains however, among a sizeable minority, that as one respondent put it, 'the influential people, elite class and outsiders were prioritized on every front' [Interview 7: Srinagar].

### 2.5 Media Accounts

*Media manufactured the truth about the floods and portrayed as if everything was army. We are not denying [or saying] that army didn't do anything but they were not the only people who did everything [Interview 3: Srinagar].*

Aside from the collapse of the state administration, and the role of local volunteers, the third most important issue to emerge in flood victim narratives was the role of the media. As with other recent disasters in India, such as the 2013 Uttarakhand floods or Cyclone Phailin in Odisha, television journalism played an essential role in broadcasting the gravity of the disaster and the human suffering to a nation-wide audience, helping to mobilise awareness, support and assistance. By holding a critical lens to the role of government agencies in the relief efforts, the media has also enhanced the transparency and accountability of these institutions in situations of abject crisis.

However, in the case of the Kashmir floods, there was a sharp distinction drawn between the role of the local versus national media. Interviewees spoke positively

about the role of the local Srinagar-based media, many of whom were working in conditions of grave difficulty and personal adversity.

*Media played a very positive role during the floods. It was they who kept tracking the developments and helped the government and volunteers steer their operations. There were many instances wherein the media personnel left their work aside and joined hands with the volunteers for the help of people. [Interview 7: Srinagar].*

But this was markedly different from perceptions of the national New Delhi based media. Embedded within army or air force vehicles, national media reported widely on the disaster, but also tended to emphasize the positive contribution of the Indian armed forces. New Delhi-based journalists who flew in to report on the disaster sent back vivid images of the rescue of Kashmiri civilians by Indian soldiers, and often pondered aloud on air about whether this humanitarian act would transform the relationship between them.

This also contrasted with conspicuously negative coverage that they provided to the valley's separatist leaders, who were, particularly in evening news discussion programmes, strongly criticized as political opportunists seeking to capitalize from the disaster. Yasin Malik, leader of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and one of the most prominent separatist leaders in the valley, was at one point charged by national television news stations with hijacking relief in order to be seen to distribute it himself. Iftikhar Gilani, a senior Delhi-based Kashmiri journalist revealed how he was asked to participate in this:

*I got a call from a news channel wanting me to arrange visuals of the JKLF chairman Mohammad Yasin Malik rescued by the Army ... It was of course another matter that Malik was sitting at his Maisuma home, and the tourists and labourers stranded in Lal Chowk were telling journalists that Malik was the only person who for seven days reached them with water and biscuits. (Gilani 2014)*

Indeed, the national media coverage of the disaster was strongly resented by interviewees in Kashmir, both for its factual inaccuracy, and also for its political slant. While many respondents were appreciative and grateful for the rescue efforts of the Indian army, they were also angry and offended at the way in which their tragedy was presented on national television.

*Media manipulated things and fabricated the truth to show army in good light. But no reporter wanted to wet his feet in water to show the cruel reality - and that reality was that the army failed, the system failed. I am not saying that army did nothing, but it did not do what was being reported on TV. [1 Indra Nagar, Srinagar].*

Largely as a result of national media coverage, the abiding image of the 2014 floods that the rest of India has been left is one of Indian army soldiers rescuing desperate, but ultimately ungrateful Kashmiri civilians. In contrast, the abiding impression that Kashmiris have been left with is of a prejudiced national media that grossly distorted the reality at a time to promote the Indian army.

A man from Anantnag dwelt on this this at length:

*The media was showing repeatedly pictures of soldiers carrying people out of their homes... Tell me, can seventy helicopters can save two lakh people? It was complete misrepresentation of facts... I am not saying army did nothing. NDRF and army - they did a great job. But what was the need to show? What was the need to take camera-persons with you to helicopters. [41 Anantnag].*

### 3. The Politics of Flood Disaster in Kashmir

This paper sought out survivor narratives of the 2014 Kashmir flood to understand their perspectives on the circumstances, and to identify how people have constructed meaning and grasped the disaster and its aftermath. The approach we used was sensitive to the political context of the disaster, and to the way that this disaster in particular was scrutinized by those within and without for its political import.

There are six broad issues that were distilled out. Firstly, despite the historical vulnerability of the Kashmir valley to floods, there was very poor disaster planning or preparedness. As a result, people were evacuated only at the very last minute. Secondly, it revealed the incompetence of the state in responding effectively to the crisis. Thirdly, contrary to the narrative widely circulating in the rest of India, the army's role, though not unimportant, was at best modest. Fourthly, the overwhelming majority of people were rescued by local volunteers. Fifthly, people outside Srinagar felt that relief and media attention was unfairly directed at the capital, while people in Srinagar itself felt that tourists and VIPs were prioritized. Sixthly Kashmiris deeply resented the way that the floods were portrayed on national television media, and viewed it as having exploited their misery.

In conclusion, what can be said about the politics of the 2014 Kashmir floods? Did the floods result in a political transformation or tipping point that gave rise to a different trajectory? In the weeks after the flood in October - November 2014, mounting public anger at the state government and its manifold failures took the form of numerous localised *dharnas* (demonstrations) across the valley by affected people, often with very specific demands.<sup>2</sup> In elections to the state legislature which were held on schedule just three months after the floods in December 2014, the ruling government of Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and his National Conference party lost power. The National Conference, which has dominated state politics for the last six decades, was relegated to a distant third position. In other words, the political heat generated by the flood probably carried some impact in the election results. To this extent, the floods can be said to have constituted a tipping point of sorts, in which public anger catalyzed regime change.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example these reports during and after the floods: Rising Kashmir 06.09.14, p.3 'Ramzan, Sakina, Saifullah's Cavalcade Attacked at Pantha Chowk', Rising Kashmir 28.09.14, p.5 'City's Waterlogged Areas Stage Anti-Govt Protests'.

But legislative re-balancing and the change of the state government in Jammu and Kashmir has in itself very limited political importance given the scale of the larger unresolved issues and the dispute at hand. Alongside the ambivalence that Kashmiris hold towards their incorporation into India is deep cynicism towards federated electoral democracy as an instrument of Indian rule. The real tipping point in contemporary Kashmiri political history occurred in the late-1980s, with the explosive outburst of a mass movement that rejected federalism within India in favour of separatism and radical insurgent militancy. In 2014, Kashmir was in a period of de-radicalization, and effectively recovering from the consequences of this episode.

While it would thus be premature to draw far-reaching conclusions, and bearing in mind the limitations of the evidence at hand, the simple answer to the question is that the direct political consequences were limited. The floods served neither to catalyse radical change, and neither did it unlock a transformative potential among the conflicting parties. This is not to suggest that there are no political consequences to the floods – but only that they are diffuse, may become evident over time, and might need to be examined with different research tools.

What is perhaps more important than the measurable political outcomes due to the flood is the way that many actors, including the national media, expected that it *would* be politically significant and transformative. As a result, they sought to gain from it, enact meaningful political performances to be recorded for posterity, and extract political impact from their actions. This is evident for example, in the way that the national media showcased the role of the Indian army in rescue and relief, and then laboured to insert its views on the political ramifications. Television journalists and news analysis shows in New Delhi frequently follow up visuals of soldiers rescuing civilians with questions and panel discussions about whether this act of charity would change their relationship, and make Kashmiris value the army more.

The strong implication of this was that Kashmiris ought to have gratitude for the army's generosity, and thus transform themselves into loyal Indians. This 'ambivalent feeling of gratitude' that Ruwanpura and Hollenbach (2011:21) describe of the recipients of post-disaster aid has acute resonance here because the gift in question has all the characteristics of a Trojan horse. The great ambivalence that Kashmiris felt towards the relief and rehabilitation provided by the army and various wings of the Indian state is precisely because it readily stood to be transformed into a social debt.

Finally, rather than viewing this particular episode for its direct political fallout – which was in any event minimal – it can instead be profitably viewed simply as a moment of revelation. Moments of crisis often serve to lift the veil of normality and provide a rare moment of clarity into the workings of power and to the social relationships that govern their lives, rendering the status-quo painfully visible. In their hour of need, Kashmiri society found that it was provided for largely by itself: by the public-spiritedness of its own youth, and by the generosity and benevolence of its own people. This answer from a farm labourer in Pulwama summarized what many felt that they had learned:

*The real face of the institutions came to the surface during the floods. The state government remained a mute spectator. It seemed as if they had no clue what to do. The national media used the floods as a platform to paint the Indian army as the saviour of the general public. The army was actually busy in rescuing the non locals and tourists, but Radio Kashmir Srinagar played an anchor role in connecting people. The police appeared on the scene only when the dust had settled. [Interview 49: Pulwama]*

The floods have in that sense provided Kashmiris with further evidence to confirm three widely held beliefs. Firstly, the floods provided evidence that the state government is ineffective and that the central government does not prioritise them. Secondly, it confirmed widely held perceptions that the Indian media is hostile to them, that it willfully distorts the reality of what happens in Kashmir. Thirdly, it reinforces the belief that their safety and well-being rests within elements of Kashmiri society itself.

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7. Rising Kashmir 23.09.14, p.1: 'The Young Team that Rescued 1500 Villagers'.
8. Rising Kashmir 28.09.14, p.5 'City's Waterlogged Areas Stage Anti-Govt Protests'.
9. Rising Kashmir 01.10.14, p.4 'GOI Has No Interest in Rehabilitating Kashmiris: UJC Chief'.

#### APPENDIX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWS BY REFERENCE NUMBER AND LOCATION

- |    |                        |
|----|------------------------|
| 1  | Indra Nagar Srinagar   |
| 2  | Jawahar Ngar, Srinagar |
| 3  | Qamarwari, Srinagar    |
| 4  | Kursoo Rajbagh         |
| 5  | Kursoo Rajbagh         |
| 6  | Kursoo Rajbagh         |
| 7  | Bemina, Srinagar       |
| 8  | Rambagh, Srinagar      |
| 9  | Qamarwari, Srinagar    |
| 10 | Bemina, Srinagar       |
| 11 | Bemina, Srinagar       |
| 12 | Kursoo Rajbagh         |
| 13 | Qamarwari              |
| 14 | Kursoo Rajbagh         |
| 15 | Rajbagh                |
| 16 | Beighpura, Pulwama     |
| 17 | Dangerpura, Pulwama    |
| 18 | Dogripura, Pulwama     |
| 19 | Bijbehara Anantnag     |
| 20 | Bijbehara Anantnag     |
| 21 | Bijbehara Anantnag     |
| 22 | Bijbehara Anantnag     |
| 23 | Arweni Anantnag        |
| 24 | Pattan                 |
| 25 | Pattan                 |
| 26 | Pattan                 |
| 27 | Pattan                 |

28	Pattan
29	Pattan
30	Pattan
31	Pattan
32	Pattan
33	Pattan
34	Pattan
35	Pattan
36	Shivpora, Srinagar
37	Indra Nagar Srinagar
38	Bemina, Srinagar
39	Kelan, Kulgam
40	Arigutun, Kulgam
41	Anantnag
42	Gopipora, Pulwama
43	Kulgam
44	Batengoo, Anantnag
45	Kulgam
46	Kanjigund, Anantnag
47	Tral, Pulwama
48	Awantipora, Pulwama
49	Aghanzpora, Pulwama
50	Agahzpora, Pulwama