

# Did You Know?

In the Terai region of Nepal, the flat lands of Nepal on the border with India, floods are a regular phenomenon. Flash floods and riverine floods mainly affect domestic property and agricultural fields. Over the years, local people, especially elders and other critical actors (e.g., ‘innovative farmers’) have accumulated everyday knowledge and specialist knowledge about the floods through daily observation and practical experience of their surroundings. Local stories and anecdotes related to floods abound and reveal how people live and interpret their landscape over time. Their accounts provide many interpretations of the history and nature of past floods. For example, people distinguish between normal and exceptional floods and have been witnessing changes in the rivers’ morphology. Life stories reveal the influence of different caste systems, mainly Hindu, on people’s ability to adjust to floods. These stories highlight how in many cases floods contribute to making the poor poorer while the rich are more likely to profit.

When heavy and continuous rains start in the village or higher up in the mountains, people know that these are warning signals of an impending flood and this alerts them to the danger. Before

the floods come, they notice changes in the colour, smell, and sound (due to the speed) of the water and floating wood and dead animals. Depending on their household characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, capacity to rely on relatives outside, number of vulnerable members, such as a sick or elderly person or pregnant women), some family members may leave the house in advance, or as soon as the water starts to overflow, and go to safe places in the village, to friends, or to relatives outside the village. Villagers use high places such as elevated private houses or courtyards, elevated common grounds, and safe public buildings to escape from floods; and they take their cattle with them. Depending upon their economic status, households who stay in the village during the floods start storing food and firewood one to three months before the rainy season.

Some households have learned over time to adjust to recurrent floods; and often the richest households who have more land manage to turn change into opportunity. The poorest, on the other hand, manage to adapt somehow but may become embedded in a poverty spiral because of their lack of assets and options. People’s coping strategies include combining different materials

for construction, elevating house foundations, and consolidating the walls of their houses with mud, bamboo fences, and/or vegetation. Local indigenous structures such as grain stores, multipurpose platforms, and circular mud repositories enable people to store food and keep other important belongings in elevated places. In some cases, drinking water pumps are elevated, embankments are built with local materials to protect the village from floods, and small boats are made to prevent the villagers from being completely isolated from the outside during floods. Other non-structural measures include seasonal and permanent migration, drying and collecting food and firewood in advance for food security, changing land-management strategies, adopting soil conservation methods along the river bed, adopting informal rules for grazing and firewood cutting, and relying on dispersed

landholdings. Finally, learning from past mistakes also enables people to prepare for future floods.

Local people communicate about past natural disasters from one generation to another and from place to place, mainly orally, using local stories, songs, and proverbs. Songs and proverbs related to floods help people to remember past events and play a key role in building community awareness (especially for the younger generation who may not have witnessed exceptional floods). Unfortunately, local singers are leaving in search of well-paying jobs outside the village and as a result of the growing use of radio and, in some cases, television. Thus the oral tradition is weakening, and new ways need to be found to capture and transmit the folk memory.