

Chapter 7

Communicating About Floods

Knowledge generation in itself will not be sufficient to build adaptive capacity in social-ecological systems (Folke et al. 2002, p373). Generating knowledge does not mean that knowledge is understood, memorised, and used. In other words, knowledge generation is different from knowledge assimilation. In many societies based on oral traditions, past events, including flood crises, are embedded in memory through storytelling, songs, poems, proverbs, worshipping activities and ceremonies, rituals, and so forth. Various studies in anthropology and human ecology (e.g., Folke et al. 2002; Berkes 1999) have shown how rituals and taboo are the transformation of social memory into practical resource and ecosystem management.

Traditionally, songs and poems are an important part of the Nepali and Terai culture. Men used to compete with improvised songs and the winner was able to take a woman instantly as his wife! Some of the songs collected here focus entirely on floods, whereas others mention floods among other important issues the villagers are facing. In some cases, songs and proverbs become the repository (as much as the relay) of past flood

events and can help stimulate people's learning, memory, and creativity. They contribute to the transmission of flood-coping strategies (e.g., machan), create common knowledge, and share a common understanding of change related to frequent and infrequent flood events. As such, songs and proverbs can also help to build a sense of community and solidarity within the village and/or within the different groups affected. They serve as a way of communicating in time (between different generations) and in space (from place to place).

Worship, story telling, songs, and proverbs not only help people to remember past events but also help them to convey messages in an attractive and convincing manner. Often, local singers or composers are key knowledge carriers and change agents who play a vital role within the community in terms of building awareness. Local songs and proverbs also help to turn abstract events into something more vivid and concrete. Indeed, the younger generation may not have yet faced a major flood and therefore it is difficult for them to fully understand what it means and to consider it possible in the future. Today, local singers are disappearing from the villages due to

modernisation of media, globalisation processes (i.e., access to radio and for the better-off TV) and livelihood diversification (getting jobs outside the village).

Worship and Sacrifice

“We make sacrifices to get rid of the floods (a small temple stands close to the river bank) in January or February because we have more free time and money at that time of the year.” (Kishun Devi Yadav, 70, Katarait VDC, Dhanusha District)

Religious and spiritual beliefs and practices help people to make sense of life, including crisis events such as floods, and to deal with the uncertainties related to it. As such, worship and sacrifice are also important psychological coping strategies which help people to exteriorise their anxiety.

Songs and Poems³

Transmitting experiences from place to place

Although most people were shy in the beginning and had to be convinced about the importance of their knowledge, they often felt very proud and showed lots of interest in listening to their own voice afterwards. Songs and proverbs can provide a

³ All the songs have been translated from Maithali by Pradeep Singh and Vijay Khadgi. The transliterated originals are in the Annex.

great platform for building local people’s awareness on natural disasters and for external organisations to understand better the history of previous hazards and how it is perceived and transmitted within the community and between generations (Shreepur VDC, Sarlahi District).

*Have mercy Mother Ganga⁴, the world is flooded
So much trouble you gave us, now we cannot endure it.
Suddenly waters came and flooded the fields, houses,
buildings, flooded everything.
Some were sleeping, some were awake, and some were
talking.
When the waters came at midnight, nobody knew what to
do.
Every inch of the Mother Land is crying Ram⁵
Run-run Lord Krishna! We are dying Lord Ram!⁶*
Song narrated by Ramu Thakur Brahmin, 70,
Shreepur VDC, Sarlahi District

Ramu learned this song from an Indian book he bought after a major flood in Shreepur about 52 years ago. Other elders in the village also know this song.

⁴ Goddess of Water in the Hindu religion

⁵ Ram is the name of a Hindu God. According to the mythology, Ram was the husband of Janaki or Sita, the daughter of Janak, who was the King of Janakpur, the major town in Danusha District.

⁶ Krishna is a Hindu God.

Transmitting experiences to other generations

*The flood of 1966 did unexpected things.
When floods came to Lakhandehi (river), they went to Sundarpur.⁷
When diarrhoea affected water, people consumed the same water.⁸
Then people became intoxicated⁹ and resorted to fighting.
Some broke their jaws and some broke their heads.
Salt, blood, and law, all became cheaper.¹⁰
When in 1966, floods came to Bheem River.¹¹
Son and father were harvesting seeds.
Daughter and mother were fetching water.
Bheem River's floods drowned both of them.
From the other shore, Kheru could only beat his chest.¹²
The flood of 1966 did unexpected things.*

Song narrated by Ram Ekbal Sah,
Piparyia VDC, Sarlahi District

⁷ Name of a village close to Pipariya VDC in Sarlahi District

⁸ Water is everywhere; people excrete in and consume the same water. Indeed latrines and toilets are still an exception in the villages.

⁹ Sick, but also the term connotes a sense of madness (the expression is often used to describe a drunken person).

¹⁰ Salt in Hindu society symbolises an important survival item one can obtain from working relationships. It is equivalent to 'bread' in other cultures. "I have eaten your salt" is a colloquial expression meaning that you are employing me. The sentence means that employers-employees, masters-servants relations ('salt'), blood relations ('blood') and local laws ('law') have less or no value due to the impact of floods.

¹¹ Small tributary river

¹² Kheru (common masculine local name) could only mourn them



Figure 31: Recording local people's songs, especially with the elders, was very successful during the documentation process.

Ram Ekbal Sah learned this poem from the late Rudal Saho, a famous local singer from Piparyia who composed the song after a major flood in 1966. The villagers used to sing this poem during the village elections and any other important events to raise people's awareness. The poem captures the range of socioeconomic impacts of the flood at village and household levels. Impacts include health, livelihood, equity, and gender issues. The poem describes how the flood brings water-borne diseases and how people suffer from lack of drinking water and from diarrhoea. The salt brought by the flood damages the fields and the land loses its economic value. The fight for

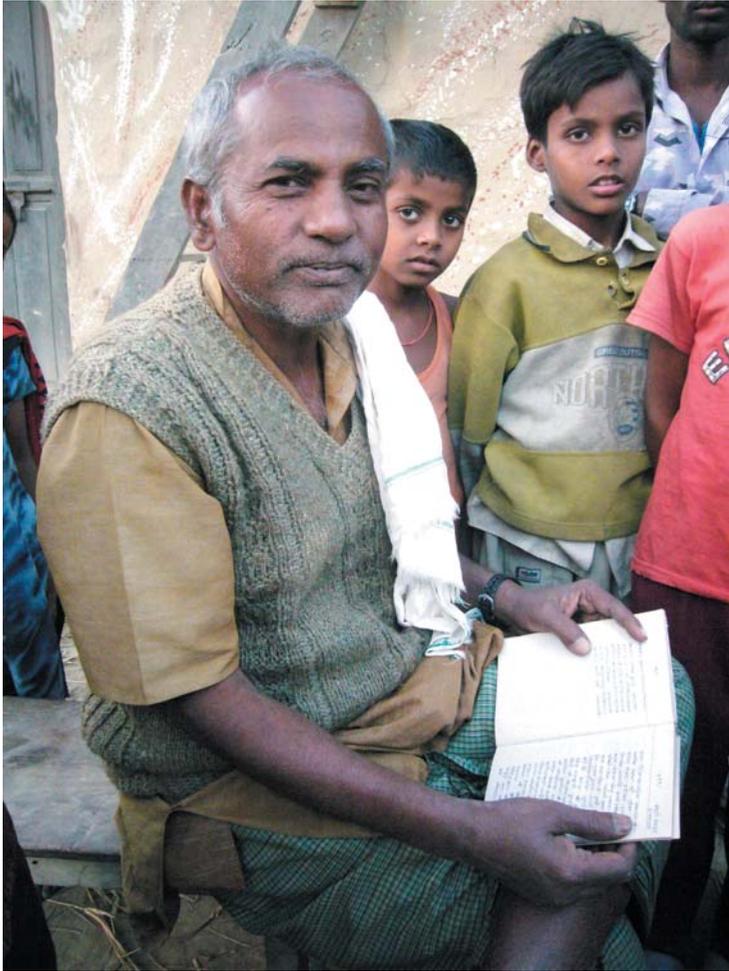


Figure 32: Ram Ratan Yadav showing his personal song and poem book related to ‘the politics and bad habits of the villagers’, Deuri VDC, Dhanusha District

limited resources often turns into violence, hampering the law and local order. The death of the mother and the daughter denotes how women are more often the victims of floods than men.

There are many more songs like these, covering such wide-ranging topics as political turmoil, personal loss, and all and any of the difficulties village people face – including floods and other disasters. They give a considerable insight into issues of concern, as well as being a form of oral history.

Pleading for survival

The following song illustrates the tragic situation of the people who have no other option than living close to or in the river bed. In this context, survival is the leitmotiv and this call for survival is addressed to the villagers themselves as much as to the government. They do not see any future unless the government builds a dam. During the floods, people suffer from hunger, bad health, transportation issues, and damage to their homes. Because the government does not intervene, they are forced to continue building their houses in this vulnerable spot (“We will build our homes in the stream”).

*We built houses in the stream, so that somehow we can survive.
We need to survive, O, we need to survive!
Children are hungry, and ask for food;
But our stores are empty the whole year
How to manage survival, O, how to manage survival?
Government of Nepal, there is no future for us.
Please build a dam across the river so that we can survive somehow
We will cut bamboo and build machan¹³
and put our children there.
We will spend the monsoon there, we will survive anyhow.
In Saawan,¹⁴ our children are sick.
There is no way to come and go.
The river has drowned our homes, how can we survive.
We should survive, O, we should survive.
We will build our homes in the streams, we will survive somehow.*

Improved song composed by Hulas Giri, Suckchaina, Laxmipur, Sarlahi District, 2006

¹³ See previous chapter

¹⁴ Literally, 'the watery month', the month of the year in the Nepali calendar that receives most precipitation, from mid-July to mid-August.



Figure 33: Hulas Giri improvising a song on flood issues and how they are affecting the village (Suckchaina, Laxmipur, Sarlahi District)

The nature of the rivers

'Hardinath Jaladhar' (the helpful lake) was its initial name

It used to help people with irrigation and drinking water.

Now it has become a 'Jallad' (the executioner)

Doing the job of chasing away and killing people.

Narrated by Ram Ratan Yadav, Deuri VDC, Dhanusha District (translated from Nepali)

This is the very nature of the river,

Take off your clothes and cross the river.¹⁵

Wake up, wake up farmer brother,

The Jalaidh (River) flood is troubling us.

Sons and daughters are starving to death.

Pick your 'tokar'¹⁶ and spades and get ready.¹⁷

Narrated by villagers, Annupati, Katarait VDC, Dhanusha District

¹⁵ Take off your clothes and overcome your fear

¹⁶ Baskets/buckets for transporting sand

¹⁷ Call for mitigation work among villagers (cooperation)

Proverbs

Living near enemies and building houses near rivers are never wise.

Quoted by different villagers

The river and the snake never run straight.

Narrated by Ramkailash Roy and Bijay Thakur, Shreepur VDC, Sarlahi District

This proverb is well known by elders and youths in both Shreepur and Belhi VDCs in Sarlahi District.

Box: Did you ask? Communicating about floods

What are the local stories about previous flood events? Who knows these stories in the community: both elders and young people? Do people in the village know local songs, proverbs, and poems about past natural hazards?