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**GOONJ**  
*From Myths to Realities..*

*Redefining Disaster Relief & Rehabilitation -Part II*



This story is about the 5 common myths about disasters, the people who face them and why are these wrong? To many of us living in the cities, a tyre puncture in the middle of a road or a car blocking our parking space can ruin our day. Probably because that's as far as most of us experience things going terribly wrong. We are fortunate indeed.

Every year, millions of people see their homes, precious things and lifetime earnings burnt down or their homes and belongings sunk underwater. BUT floods in *Srinagar* and more recently in *Chennai*, *Mumbai* are a wake-up call for all of us.

The impossible has happened; the disaster has come home. Does it matter whether a loss is ten thousand or ten million? To someone

who is hit by a disaster, it is their lifetime earnings and assets. Many of us often tend to think of disaster victims as 'people like them'-who will eat whatever we give, wear whatever we give.. Basically live on whatever terms and conditions we decide. Since they have lost everything, they really shouldn't be finicky about their liking, culture, practices, etc. Now imagine if this victim was you or me..

In the tsunami in *Tamil Nadu*, fishermen lost boats worth millions.. In the *Gujarat* earthquake, an entire area where mostly jewellers lived, lost their homes and with it gold and silver worth millions. Stranded in the flooded city of *Srinagar*, people who had palatial homes lost their buildings, carpets, expensive furniture, cars and belongings. Hotels worth millions fell like a house of cards on the banks of the Ganges when *Uttarakhand* floods happened. Disasters throw up





nasty shockers, especially when we are not paying attention. That's why our understanding of disaster and disaster-hit needs correction.

### **Myth 1**

***Disaster hit people do not accept old clothes. That's why we see huge piles on the roads after every disaster.***

**Reality;** Most of what we perceive about a disaster happening far away is usually through media reports which can be misleading sometimes. This myth is a classic case in point. Relief agencies get a lot of flak when pictures of cloth piles scattered everywhere after a disaster emerges through the media. Some of it is rightly directed but what about the cloth that people do accept. That never makes it to a media story!!

Let's take a step back for a moment and first introspect on the sensibilities of what we give. The truth is many of us give what we have and not what is necessarily needed by the disaster hit. If hundreds of people put in their heart and soul while giving, some unscrupulous people also take it as an opportunity to clear their junk



at home. A mismatch between what is given and what is needed ends up on the roads. We have seen this happening repeatedly. After the tsunami when we worked on about 100 truckloads of un-distributed clothes in a *Chennai's* government godown, we found piles of dirty undergarments, completely torn clothes and thousands of woollens, warm monkey caps and blankets for a disaster in a tropical weather state.

The manner in which the relief agencies give the material also matters a lot. Giving mindfully with attention to the respect and dignity of the disaster-hit cannot be emphasised enough. There is a big difference in attitude between throwing or giving something. An easy litmus test is to imagine ourselves at the receiving end. **'Cloth for Work' (CFW)** has taught us that if you give cloth with dignity, people not only accept it wholeheartedly but are willing to undertake



massive developmental work voluntarily for their community. Being sensitive to specific geographical and cultural needs also makes a big difference in what is accepted. Women in Kashmir don't wear saris while in *Bihar* and *Odisha* women wear only saris. On the other hand women in the cities mostly wear and therefore largely contribute jeans, t-shirts and ladies suits. In villages, women wear sari, blouse & petticoat or the traditional dress of their area. In the middle of a disaster would a city person start wearing a *ghaghra choli* overnight? There are some more subtle but significant gaps like many ladies' suits given for the disaster-hit don't have a *nara* (string) to tie it. If a flood victim were to get such a suit, she won't be able to use it simply because she won't be able to arrange for a string easily. It all goes back to an age-old rule of life - that the dignity we ascribe to ourselves is the dignity everyone else also deserves.

At the start of any disaster relief work Goonj usually highlights a specific DON'T- '*Don't send us general clothes*'. Many people find this intriguing, even frustrating given our ongoing work around cloth collection, but the reason behind this advisory is simple. Immediately after a disaster people either lose their homes or move away from them. In the first few days, they have little space to store anything that is not an absolute essential. Also given Goonj's work on cloth through out the year, it is able to take care of the immediate cloth needs of people with its existing stock. Clothes from the masses at this time become more of a burden as it blocks precious storage space needed for urgent essentials like food etc.

### **Myth 2**

***Things are back to normal within a few weeks.***

**Reality;** "अब तो ये 100 रुपए का नोट भी तीन मील लम्बा लगता है"

(This 100 rupee note seems 3 miles long), almost a month after the Uttarakhand floods *Dinmani*, a tea vendor at village *Triyuginarayan* (*Rudraprayag* district, *Uttarakhand*), smiled and said, "At this time our money boxes used to be full & tourists all around. In just a few months





*we used to earn for the entire year. Now we don't even have 200 rupees to pay for school fees."*

While large quantities of relief material are reached to disaster-hit areas in the initial weeks when the entire world's attention is there, the real need lasts much longer. The big finances and resources are needed more urgently a few weeks after a disaster, precisely when they start drying up. After the community kitchens close and the media attention wanes, people are still struggling for food, shelter, clothing and employment. In this time most agencies move to rehabilitation but relief is still required even in the process of rehabilitation.

That's why relief efforts need to be phased out slowly instead of being stopped abruptly. When needs and shortages become more pressing, often subsequent winters, rains, health crises and migration turn into bigger disasters. Perhaps one practical answer to this challenge is the round the year engagement with the disaster hit or disaster prone communities, to create a buffer of essential material to respond in real time.

### **Myth 3**

***Money alone can solve the problems or instead of material give cash to people!!***

**Reality;** In the international debates on relief models, many agencies are arguing about cash transfer instead of material. But post disasters many times the essentials are not available in markets, shops are gutted or ATMs & banks don't have money, in such situations this approach doesn't serve the disaster-hit adequately..

In the *J&K* floods in 2014 and in *Chennai* floods in 2015, even the most affluent people were stranded somewhere. With all the money and connections they could muster, people still couldn't reach their loved ones for days. With no accessibility from outside, even the most essential medicines could not reach people for weeks. In floods like





the ones in *Uttarakhand* and *Chennai*, even if you had money there was no way to get out of the crisis. In some far-flung parts of *Uttarakhand*, it was tough to get porters to reach relief to villages in the higher terrains. Wherever they could reach, it was at the other end of many hours of arduous trekking to reach a small village of just twelve families.

*"We procured some 200 tents on our own but soon the markets ran out of material, we had the funds but there were no tents in the market, the rising demand led to black-marketing.. We needed to have something in bulk and in continuity which Goonj ensured."* says *Pemba Sherpa*, co-founder of one of our partner groups called '*Believers*' in *Nepal*. He adds further *"It's not about 3-4 hours straight drive. We are talking about four hours drive to Gorkha Bazaar, then 4 hours drive off the road and then another 3 hours walk and that's just one small village of 20 families there."* In *Nepal* salt was airlifted in a chopper to deliver to a completely cut-off village because even though they got ration, there was no salt.







In *Gujarat*, after the earthquake, news spread that tankers would deliver water to every disaster-hit village but there were no buckets. People didn't even have a jug to store water so many people went thirsty despite the fact that tankers came in with water. In *Tamil Nadu* after the tsunami people got 50 kilograms of rice as relief material. They somehow arranged the firewood but many didn't have cooking vessels. In some disasters, people who had thousands of rupees in their banks struggled for two spoons of tea leaves in the absence of shops and systems.

*Such is the irony of disasters; the access matters more than your bank balance!!*

**Myth 4:**  
**Disaster relief = charity**

**Reality;** The people of village India have broken this myth time and again. Goonj has been witness to the spirit of the people in the most far-flung villages for over two decades. How do they bounce back, ready to work on building back their world even in a time of complete uncertainty and despair? From hill people in *Uttarakhand*, *J&K*, North East India to down south in *Tamil Nadu*, *Andhra Pradesh* to

*Bundelkhand*, people have consistently taken up development work after every disaster. After the 2015 *Chennai* floods the general perception was that given the highly politicised culture of freebies in the region, our model won't work. BUT people in the worst flood-affected parts took to cleaning their water bodies, doing community repair works, etc. under *CFW*. It was the same story in *Andhra Pradesh* and in every other disaster we have worked in so far.

**Myth 5:**  
**Relief Material is fine but why do you need money?**

**Reality;** In September/October 2015, a small landlocked state of *Manipur*, lost all its connecting routes from outside in the wake of landslides. Reaching relief to the affected areas of the state was one of Goonj's most challenging assignments. After waiting for 7 days, for broken roads to be repaired, our relief trucks were re-routed via





Meghalaya from Silchar (Assam) adding an extra 600 kilometres journey to the process. While the collapse of the Barak bridge further halted the relief process some essential relief material from Delhi and Mumbai was airlifted to Imphal, from where the next phase of the journey started.

Team Goonj with local partner personnel travelled through risky thick jungles, muddy roads and rivers to reach relief material to 2,254 households in 51 villages in 4 affected districts namely Thoubal, Chandel, Churachandpur and Ukhrul..thanks to the saviour Shaktiman. This jumbo truck may be retired from the Indian Army but it made our relief efforts possible in the most difficult terrains. In disasters, Goonj's insistence on reaching out to the last person in need, makes the work worthwhile.

**BUT it costs;** just the transportation cost of a truck of material, with



carrying capacity of kits for 400 people, goes up to INR 150,000 apart from all other logistical expenses like personnel, space etc. There onwards the material is reached out in smaller vehicles or through mules/porters, to far away villages..

***Hence money also matters to keep the relief and rehabilitation works going!!***

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