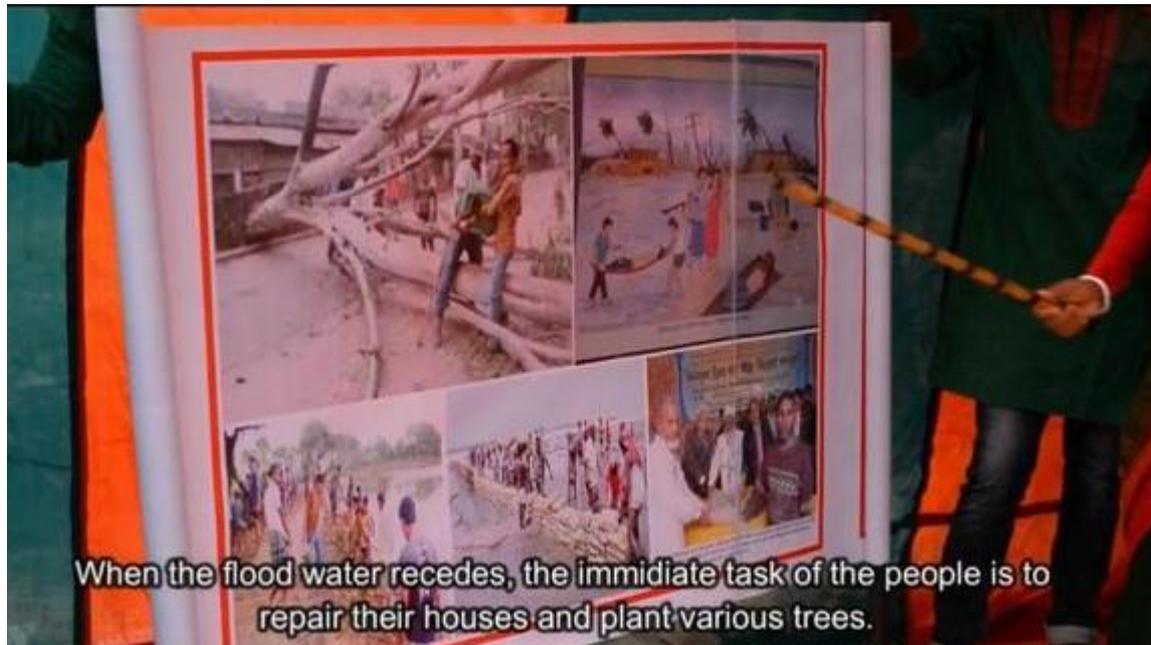


How people are learning disaster preparedness through a traditional folk art

Mahmuda Akter and Faizah Jaheen Ahmed
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Screenshot from the music video of the Pattachitra song on Disaster Risk Reduction.

Pattachitra is a form of folk art that has been used since ancient times in the rural areas of Bangladesh and India

Although people of the South-western coast of Bangladesh have been struggling with cyclones for the last a few years, they still lack adequate awareness. That is why during cyclone Sidr and Aila there was a lot of damage in those areas like loss of human and animal lives. A lot of resources were destroyed, many people lost everything and became destitute. So, the government and various NGOs have been working to raise awareness among the local people of these areas which includes- awareness training, Utthan-boithok (backyard meetings), posters, seminars, plays, songs and so on. Among them, one of the traditional media to raise awareness is through Pattachitra, which is renowned in both the Indian and Bangladesh's Sundarbans region.

Pattachitra is a form of folk art that has been used since ancient times in the rural areas of Bangladesh and India. It is a medium of storytelling through clothes or patta on which paintings and pictures or chitra are made and songs are sung based on the paintings. The painters, or Potuas, earn their livelihood by making Pattachitra and have been doing it for generations.

Earlier Pattachitras used to contain paintings of mythological characters, historical and religious events. With changing times, the paintings also started to focus on raising awareness on various social issues like dowry and family planning, and issues related to health, with the most recent one being the COVID-19 pandemic and how to tackle it.

Apart from these, it has also proven to be a useful medium to raise awareness on environmental matters like climate change and disaster management. The bright visuals and the lyrics of the songs contain strong messages that serve the dual purpose of capturing the people's attention through entertainment and educating them on these crucial issues at the same time.

Through a project known as TAPESTRY, ICCCAD is trying to find out how the climate and disaster vulnerable people of Sundarbans area of Bangladesh survive by coping with various

disasters. At one stage of the research, they found out that the Pattachitra song is more popular among local people than other media of raising awareness.

People of all types, all ages listen to this song with great enthusiasm. Moreover, those who do not know how to read and write can easily understand what is meant by this song. Those who cannot hear can understand by looking at the pictures, and those who cannot see can understand by listening to music.

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A villager from Shyamnagar said, “We don't understand half of what is said in training, and we also don't listen attentively as much as we understand because it is very boring to listen. However, at the training, they give us food and money, that's why we go to listen to them.” According to a man from Shyamnagar, Pattachitra song does not sound like a boring speech to them, it seems like a way of entertainment. The words are spoken in the melody of the song so they listen to it very attentively and are able to remember these words effortlessly’.

So, as a part of the research, a video has been made with the Pattachitra song where the issues of disaster are revealed through a song. The Pattachitra song explicitly mentioned the sufferings of the coastal people in Bangladesh, particularly in the Sundarbans. It talked about cyclones Aila and Sidr that made the people so vulnerable that it took them years to get back to normal.

It also covered other climate-induced disasters like floods, droughts, river erosion and tidal waves that occur every year and destroy their lives and livelihood so they have to start from scratch every year or suffer with their families from poverty. The song highlighted anthropogenic activities that have contributed to climate change and the rise in global temperature, for example through the cutting of the trees in the Sundarbans. However, through the song, the people were encouraged not to give up and keep going to focus on adaptation.

It was interesting how the pre, during and post-disaster activities were so easily explained through the Pattachitra song like being prepared with food and other resources, leaving livestock on elevated places, sending pregnant women, the elderly and the children to cyclone shelters first, and repairing houses and planting trees to be more resilient against cyclones and other disasters. There was a special focus on paying attention to warning signals during cyclones which are usually difficult for most coastal people to understand during training but they heard about these through the song with a lot of interest.

“It also covered other climate-induced disasters like floods, droughts, river erosion and tidal waves that occur every year”

Lately, the traditional livelihood sources of the mangrove-dependent people of the Sundarbans, like agriculture, honey collection and fishing have been at risk due to frequent disasters and more so because of cyclone Amphan.

Though already a year has passed since the cyclone, the coastal people are still coming to terms with the destruction it has caused to their livelihood sources. The TAPESTRY project works to transform the livelihood opportunities of the coastal people to make them adapt to and become resilient against disasters.

Along the same vein, the Pattachitra can be an example of a transformative livelihood option that will not only help the coastal people to earn livelihood but also raise awareness about climate change and disasters through the bright illustrations and simple but meaningful songs. In addition, our Sundarbans area-centric culture and traditions will be preserved year after year through this song.

Mahmuda Akter is currently working as a Research Officer at the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), her research interest lies in Climate Change Adaptation, Capacity Building, Migration, Disaster Management, and Urban Development. Can be reached out at mahmuda.mity@icccad.org.

Faizah Jaheen Ahmed is working in International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) as a Research Intern, her research interest lies in Loss and Damage, Gender Issues and Waste Management. Can be reached at faizah.ahmed@northsouth.edu.

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