

“MEDIA AND ECO TRAUMA: MEDIA AS A CATALYST FOR ECO TRAUMA, A CASE STUDY OF RECENT ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTERS IN KERALA AND NEIGHBOURHOOD AREAS”

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ABSTRACT

Eco trauma, the emotional and psychological distress caused by environmental disasters, is a growing concern in today's world. Media, while playing a key role in informing the public during crises, often intensifies this trauma through sensationalized reporting and emotional exploitation. This paper explores the media's negative impact during major environmental disasters in Kerala, and border areas including the floods and Wayanad landslides, also a focus on the tragic death of Arjun, the lorry driver at Shirur during landslide. By highlighting fear-driven coverage and neglect of core ecological issues like deforestation and poor land management, the study emphasizes the urgent need for ethical and sensitive disaster reporting. It calls for media to shift from creating fear to fostering awareness, offering solutions, and reducing the emotional toll of eco trauma.

Keywords : Eco-Trauma, Eco-Anxiety, Resilience, PTSD, Catalyst

INTRODUCTION

Eco Trauma: A Growing Concern

Natural disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and wildfires, can have profound emotional and psychological effects on individuals and communities. The immediate aftermath of these catastrophes is often marked by intense feelings of grief, loss, and trauma. Survivors frequently experience acute stress reactions, such as anxiety, insomnia, and difficulty concentrating. In many

cases, these emotional struggles persist long after the physical damage has been repaired. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a common outcome for individuals who have experienced or witnessed the destruction caused by such events. In addition, the psychological toll can affect entire communities, leading to collective anxiety and a sense of helplessness. This emotional burden may also manifest as a pervasive fear of future disasters, often referred to as “eco-anxiety,” which can be especially pronounced in regions prone to repeated environmental disasters. This emotional fallout from ecological catastrophes is what is often referred to as “eco trauma,” which has long-term implications for mental health and well-being.

Eco trauma refers to the profound psychological and emotional distress that individuals and communities experience as a result of environmental disasters. Many often environmental disasters lead to the destruction of homes, livelihoods, and the natural environment, leaving behind lasting effects on mental health of the victims. Grief, anxiety issues, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are some of the various psychological symptoms faced by victims of eco-trauma. The trauma is not just from the immediate impact of the disaster but also from the long-term disruptions to one's sense of security, belonging, and connection to the environment. This emotional suffering can be compounded by the loss of resources, displacement, and the uncertainty of recovery. Understanding eco trauma is critical in supporting the affected populations and helping them recover both physically and emotionally.

The media plays a pivotal role in informing the public during environmental crises, serving as a bridge between the event's occurrence and the public's response. The media's role during environmental crises is far-reaching. It goes beyond the mere reporting of facts; it involves educating the public, advocating for sustainable practices, scrutinizing government actions, and ensuring that the voices of those affected are heard. When used responsibly, the media can be a powerful force for positive change, helping communities heal, recover, and build a more sustainable future. However, the way media presents disasters can significantly influence the psychological state of the affected population. In many cases, media coverage, while well-intentioned, tends to sensationalize the crisis, focusing on shock-value images, emotional narratives, and graphic depictions of the disaster's aftermath.

This often amplifies the trauma rather than mitigating it, creating an atmosphere of fear, helplessness, and despair. Repeated exposure to traumatic media content can also contribute to vicarious trauma for those watching from a distance, deepening their own anxiety and distress. The media's responsibility extends beyond reporting the facts; it must also offer healing, hope, and a constructive perspective that empowers communities to rebuild.

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a **descriptive research design**, where it documents the incidents of landslides, their causes, impacts, and individual cases like the death of Arjun. It also uses an **analytical component**, where it examines how media covered these incidents across **different platforms** — newspapers, online portals, and TV channels. The paper **combines environmental studies and media analysis**, making it **multidisciplinary** in nature.

Media's Role in Amplification

The role of the media in reporting natural disasters is multifaceted, with the potential to either worsen

or aggravate the emotional impact of such events. Unfortunately, in many instances, media outlets have been criticized for sensationalizing disaster coverage. Graphic visuals, shocking imagery, and sensational headlines are often employed to capture the audience's attention and maintain high viewer ratings. However, this approach can inadvertently deepen the emotional distress of survivors and their families. While the intention may be to inform or raise awareness, the constant bombardment of distressing images and stories can reinforce feelings of powerlessness, fear, and anxiety. For example, repeated broadcasts of disaster scenes can evoke a sense of helplessness in viewers, making them feel as though they are witnessing the tragedy in real-time, even if they are far removed from the affected areas. Moreover, the media's focus on the most extreme and devastating aspects of a disaster, while neglecting stories of resilience and recovery, can distort public perception, leading to heightened anxiety and fear. This amplification of trauma through media coverage is a growing concern, as it can have long-lasting effects on both the immediate victims and broader audiences.

Focus on Kerala's Environmental Disasters

Kerala has been severely impacted by several environmental disasters, most notably the catastrophic floods of 2018 and the landslide in Wayanad in 2024. The floods left thousands homeless, destroyed infrastructure, and led to widespread loss of life. The Wayanad landslide, which struck during heavy rains, buried entire families and led to significant loss of life and property. These disasters not only caused physical damage but also took a psychological toll on the survivors.

During both of these disasters, the media played a significant role in shaping public perception. While news outlets did provide valuable information about evacuation protocols, relief efforts, and the magnitude of the disaster, they often sensationalized the scale of destruction. Images of devastated landscapes, grieving families, and the chaos of

recovery were repeatedly broadcasted, which had the unintended consequence of deepening trauma for those directly affected. Survivors, many of whom were already traumatized by the loss of their loved ones and homes, were exposed to continuous media coverage, which prolonged their distress.

During the Kerala floods, the media often focused on showing shocking images of the destruction, like flooded homes and people in distress. These graphic visuals were shown repeatedly, making people more afraid and anxious. The headlines tended to be emotional, focusing on fear rather than explaining the science behind the disaster. This kind of coverage failed to help people understand what was happening or offer any hope, increasing the sense of panic rather than providing clarity and support. Instead of looking at the bigger environmental problems that led to the floods, like deforestation and poor planning, the media focused on blaming politicians for the management of dams. Political disputes and finger-pointing took the spotlight, while important issues like the long-term impact of climate change, bad land-use practices, and the lack of preparedness were ignored. This shift in focus prevented a serious conversation about how to prevent such disasters in the future.

Constantly seeing images of destruction and hearing about the floods created emotional distress for survivors and the public. People who had already suffered losses felt retraumatized by the ongoing news coverage. The unrelenting reminders of the disaster made it harder for communities to heal and rebuild. The media didn't focus on the mental health needs of survivors, which was a critical part of recovery that was overlooked in favor of more sensational news

The landslide in Wayanad, Kerala, mainly affected three villages—Punchirimattam, Chooralmala, and Mundakkai—out of the district's 49 villages. These areas saw significant destruction, with lives lost, homes damaged, and many people displaced.

Agriculture and infrastructure were severely impacted, and recovery efforts focused on these villages. However, media reports often generalized the disaster as affecting the entire district, creating the impression of widespread destruction.

Many news reports used dramatic phrases like “Wayanad in ruins” or “Wayanad wiped out,” which exaggerated the scale of the disaster. This caused confusion and fear, not only among the affected but also in other areas of Wayanad, where life was relatively unaffected. Residents of these unaffected areas had to deal with false perceptions of the situation, impacting local businesses and tourism, as potential visitors feared the district was unsafe.

This type of coverage can be linked to **eco-trauma**, which is often intensified by media reporting. The exaggerated portrayal of the entire district being devastated contributed to not just physical and economic distress, but also emotional trauma. The media's focus on emotional stories sometimes overlooked the specific areas that were impacted, preventing better-targeted relief efforts and fueling unnecessary panic. The fear and anxiety generated by exaggerated headlines can lead to feelings of helplessness, depression, and anxiety, especially among those in unaffected regions who were unfairly portrayed as victims. This can create a collective trauma, where the entire community struggles to recover mentally, not just physically.

While the media's role in raising awareness and generating support was crucial, a more accurate and focused approach would have been better. By clearly reporting which areas were affected and reassuring the public about the safety of the rest of Wayanad, the media could have alleviated unnecessary fears, supported tourism, and helped the affected communities more effectively. This situation underscores the need for responsible and careful reporting, particularly when the emotional impact of the disaster is involved.

Arjun, a lorry driver from Kannadikkal village in Kerala's Kozhikode district, tragically lost his life in a landslide that struck Shirur village in Karnataka's Uttara Kannada district on July 16, 2024. He was driving a timber-laden truck from Belagavi to Kozhikode when the disaster occurred. After a 72-day search operation, his body, along with the truck, was recovered from the Gangavali River on September 25, 2024.

The recovery of Arjun's body became a poignant event, drawing hundreds of people from his native village to pay their respects. The emotional scenes at his funeral underscored the profound loss felt by his family and the wider community. The tragedy left a deep emotional impact on the residents, highlighting the strong bonds and support systems within the community during times of grief.

This incident also exemplifies the concept of **eco-trauma**. The loss of life due to the landslide, compounded by the ongoing media coverage, contributed to a heightened emotional response from the affected community. The traumatic event had lasting effects on both Arjun's family and the villagers who were familiar with the dangers of truck driving in such conditions. Eco-trauma is intensified when the media, by focusing on the tragedy, amplifies the emotional burden on those involved.

Media outlets played an essential role in informing the public about the disaster and the prolonged search for Arjun. However, continuous coverage of the emotional struggles of Arjun's family and the community could have inadvertently increased the psychological distress experienced by those connected to the event. The media's emphasis on the tragic details, although crucial for raising awareness, may have fostered feelings of helplessness and grief, contributing to a sense of eco-trauma.

While the media's coverage brought attention to the risks faced by lorry drivers and the importance of improving safety measures, it also highlighted

how sensationalized reporting can exacerbate the emotional impact of such events. The portrayal of the tragedy, although necessary, underscores the need for balanced reporting that takes into account both the emotional toll on the affected community and the potential for collective trauma caused by overexposure to distressing news.

In the wake of Arjun's death, the community's grief serves as a reminder of the lasting emotional effects of environmental disasters, not only on those directly affected but also on the broader public. The media'

The media plays a significant role during environmental disasters, but its coverage can also contribute to the amplification of fear and anxiety among the public. Continuous, sensationalized reporting of floods, landslides, or other crises often focuses solely on the devastation, heightening the public's sense of helplessness. This repeated coverage causes affected communities to relive their trauma, deepening their distress. While it's essential for the media to inform the public, it must balance the delivery of news without sensationalizing the tragedy, thus avoiding further emotional harm to survivors.

The loss of trust is another consequence of sensationalized media coverage. When media outlets focus on dramatic images or exaggerate the severity of a disaster, they can undermine their own credibility. Inadequate attention to practical solutions for recovery leaves the public frustrated and disillusioned. The media must strive to provide more than just the disaster itself by offering clear, actionable information on recovery efforts, prevention, and long-term resilience. Moreover, the media can unintentionally fuel polarization during a crisis by focusing on political blame rather than fostering unity. This deepens societal divides and hinders collective recovery efforts. Instead, the media should emphasize the importance of community collaboration and collective action to

aid long-term recovery, helping to heal societal divisions rather than exacerbate them.

To address these challenges, the media must adopt ethical reporting practices. Respecting the privacy of victims and survivors while avoiding sensationalism is crucial. Compassionate storytelling can provide essential information without causing unnecessary harm. It's vital that journalists strike a balance between reporting the facts and being sensitive to the emotional impact on those affected by the disaster. Furthermore, responsible media coverage should highlight the root causes of environmental disasters, such as deforestation, poor land management, and unregulated construction. By focusing on systemic issues, the media can educate the public on the broader factors contributing to crises, encouraging prevention and mitigation strategies that empower communities to reduce future risks.

Promoting resilience and recovery is also a critical responsibility for the media. By focusing on stories of communities rebuilding and recovering, the media can inspire hope and motivate others to take action. Collaborating with environmental experts to provide accurate, constructive information can guide recovery efforts and support long-term resilience.

Finally, the media must commit to long-term reporting on climate change and sustainable development. Rather than focusing solely on the immediate aftermath of a disaster, the media should continue to highlight the long-term impacts of environmental changes. By shifting from short-term sensationalism to long-term solutions, the media can play a significant role in fostering awareness, driving change, and promoting a sustainable future.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while the media plays a significant role during environmental disasters, it must adopt ethical reporting practices to minimize the emotional

toll on affected populations. Sensationalized and fear-driven coverage only amplifies ecotrauma, while responsible, balanced reporting can contribute to healing, recovery, and resilience. By focusing on the root causes of disasters, promoting long-term solutions, and highlighting stories of recovery, the media can shift from being a source of fear to becoming a catalyst for positive change, guiding communities towards a sustainable future.

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