

## **Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction**

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**Week- 01**

**Lecture- 03**

### **Resilience**

In this particular unit, we move on to the third key concept in vulnerability studies. We have looked at vulnerability, we have looked at precarity and the precariat class. In this particular session, we will move on to looking at the concept of resilience. And resilience is a very important feature of contemporary discourses. Periodically, you would have seen once we have some things like floods or earthquakes, headlines which says the city recovers from the floods, thanks to the resilience of the people, thanks to the adaptations by the people. Very common, whether it is earthquakes or manmade disasters that the city bounced back, the city fought back, the city recovered, we see these headlines.

These headlines are about resilience. Resilience is the ability of an individual or a community to bounce back after a serious crisis. It is also about the adaptation strategies or processes of an individual or a community to recover from any kind of crisis. It is the ability to recover primarily, it is the ability to heal itself, okay?

Note now that in most of the public discourses issued by the state, they ask a community to protect itself, have community policing, community welfare organizations and welfare measures that you buy private water, privatized water, you buy security, you buy private insurance and private health. In most domains of our lives, we have begun to rely upon ourselves. We have begun to find resources within ourselves as individuals, but also as communities to ensure a fairly reasonable standard of living to prevent risk. This onus on the individual, if you remember, we spoke about it in connection with precarious lives and precariat classes also. This onus on the individual to make sure that we will survive, we will cope, we will manage is a characteristic feature of the neoliberal era.

This has to do with the fact that the state has withdrawn from those domains in which it is supposed to provide us security, safety and welfare. The state has withdrawn from those functions, those domains and therefore, we are forced to do it ourselves. We are forced to find the resources to survive, to cope with severe distressing conditions on our own. This has to do with also an emphasis on local practices, local community building

exercises, local community safety measures, local funding, local voluntary activities. So, you will see this emphasis on how a community should come forward and do things.

It should help ensure security, you pay private security agencies to take care of security measures. You do rainwater harvesting so that the underwater, underground resources are restored. The funding also comes from the community. People volunteer to do certain things. So physical labour or physical expertise or physical contribution also comes from the community. Capacity building is also done by the community.

So in all cases, the ability to cope, the ability to survive, the ability to mitigate the risky situations, the potential threatening or precarious conditions must be dealt with by the locals, must be dealt with by the community. Resilience is the process by which a society tries to restructure itself in order to ward off or cope with risk, threat or disaster. As the state responsibility diminishes, a concomitant increase in individual responsibility, individual contribution, individual capacity and individual volunteerism increases. So, when the state has withdrawn, it is not on the scene any longer, the community has to do it. Otherwise, how will we live?

So, the society should not only absorb the threat, the disaster, it must find ways of avoiding that disaster. It should build itself up. It is traditionally called capacity building. We build up our capacities. So, during the pandemic, we built our capacities by getting our vaccinations and our booster shots and whatnot.

A community fights for its land, fights for the welfare of its residents, prepares security plans, hire security guards, gets private people to bring in water in cans and things like that, all of which depend entirely on how much the community is willing to sacrifice and invest in. So, in case of a certain kind of disaster, the community will find the resources to cope with that disaster and bounce back. You will remember that after the Bangalore floods and the Chennai floods, there were all those things about people trying to purchase things that will function as boats. Because your vehicles are useless, there is so much water, you will require large tubs, etc., etc.

Now where did we imagine we will need to have things like that? We never did, but now we are forced to. We are forced to because this is where there should be active intervention on the part of the state or the government machinery to ensure that these things do not happen. But since the state has not done it, you fend for yourself. Resilience is this insistence on fending for yourself. It is entirely up to you.

You do it. You find a way of doing it. So, this could be austerity measures introduced by the state. It could be certain kinds of legislation introduced by the corporates and the imposition of certain kinds of norms upon us. We learn to cope. Resilience, in other words, is the resistance to being annihilated, to being destroyed, to being injured.

It calls for adaptation by us. It is entirely up to us that we will somehow survive, we will somehow manage, we will somehow cope. That we will find the means, we will find the determination and we will find the resources to avoid risk, to avoid annihilation, to avoid any kind of detrimental consequence of anything that might happen. Which also means that it is not just a question of say natural disasters. We learn to be prepared with manmade calamities.

We learn to anticipate the next wave of a pandemic, new austerity measures from the government, the loss of value of our currency, food crisis, petrol and fuel shortages. So we start hoarding grain. We start making sure that we have currency at home, that our aged parents have a certain security. All this becomes our responsibility. So, if we live in the age of vulnerability, if we live within a precariat class, then all the resources that you can summon up will go towards building the capacity to absorb that vulnerability, to prevent that vulnerability.

But it also means that something else happens. It also means that the state does not have to do any of this. The state doesn't have to offer solutions. It doesn't have to make changes in policy because the citizens are doing it themselves. The citizens are doing all the initiatives, taking all the initiatives to make sure that things are all right, to make sure that they will survive.

The state no longer guarantees the safety. The state no longer ensures welfare, clean water, clean air, security of property and life. We do it ourselves. So in many ways, resilience means that the state withdraws and we do all the stuff ourselves. It also means that the state no longer needs to do anything.

See, that's the key point. I spoke also about adaptation briefly in passing, right? Adaptation is not something that we come to on our own. Adaptation as Michael Pelling and others have noted is top down. When there is nothing else to do, we adapt as we are forced to adapt.

There's nothing you can do about it. So, adaptation is by necessity forced upon us as a top-down mechanism, as a way or as a mode through which the state puts pressure on the community, on the people to evolve mechanisms and strategies of survival. These are basically strategies of survival. So, adaptation is- "Okay, today there is no fuel. We'll have to find some way of doing it." The price of a particular commodity has gone up or the roads are in bad shape, we find ways of adapting. I start going earlier to work because the traffic is bad. During rainy season, the roads we take are inundated or flooded. We will find alternate routes.

The schools declare holiday, rain holidays because the children can't go to school any longer. Note that these are our initiatives. These are our adaptations. But these are not adaptations we wanted to do. These are adaptations we are forced to do.

We are forced to do it because there is no other choice. You have to live, right? You have to make sure your children are safe, your older parents are safe, you yourself are safe. How do you do it? By adapting. In many places, many states, the government has asked us to introduce rainwater harvesting in our residential areas. It provides the necessary technologies and you have to evolve mechanisms.

So there are government sponsored schemes to make sure that they will come and prepare the pit to collect rainwater and that the community, the residential colony will make sure it is done. Now, in all this, what is it we are seeing? There is a water crisis. Everybody knows that. There is a water crisis. Its job is to make sure that the quality of water we receive for drinking is safe.

When the groundwater resources are clearly, tangibly decreasing, the onus is on the community to conserve water to make sure rainwater harvesting is done properly. Which means if a community has failed to do this, it is its own fault. Nobody else is at fault. What we are looking at here is then the community's responsibility to avert future risks. And we are told such communities are resilient.

They are good at adaptation. They are good at adaptation, they are resilient because they have anticipated potential crisis, whether it is electricity or water, poor roads or poor health and have devised a set of strategies by which it can, the community can, survive. So, adaptation and resilience are much lauded virtues today. Critics will tell us that such an adaptation is inherently conservative. It is inherently conservative because the onus is on us to adapt to changing conditions, but structural conditions do not change.

Let us take a simple example. Every time in a year, there is a flood or inundation along the streets, there will be the news items showing with pictures which show people driving home to work in the rains and it says the city is or was taken unawares because of the rains. Now, let me ask you, how is it that every year, every season we are taken unawares? How is it that we are unable to predict that this will happen? And since it happens every year, whose job is it to make sure that we remain safe? The answer is it is our own job. We have to make sure. So, we anticipate there will be floods, we anticipate there will be trouble on the roads, we anticipate the children will not be able to go to school or come back from school, so we adapt. So, it is an inherently conservative strategy because it means the status quo on the part of the organizations, the institutions

that are supposed to make changes, to improve policy, to improve infrastructure, that is no longer required.

It is an inherently conservative strategy because the very institutions that are supposed to take care of this such a thing does not happen has withdrawn from it. It is conservative also because it retains the status quo in terms of the state. It is something that the state does not anymore need to address because the people have done it themselves. So, the status quo remains unchanged, the conditions remain unimproved, whether it is road or electricity or water supply or whatever it might be, we have changed, the citizens have changed. So, structural changes by the state are not required, that is conservative, but the people have to adapt.

So, oxygen shortage? Do something. Antibiotic shortage? Do something. Water is of poor quality when it comes to drinking water? Do something. Who is doing something? We are. So, you see in terms of social theory and critical theory, concepts like resilience have a very powerful political role. They address questions of systemic inequalities, systemic injustice to which the answer does not come from the state, it comes from the people. They become more resilient, they become more adaptable, they become more strong. So, this is our final concept in the trinity that we have, in the triad we have looked at: vulnerability, precarity and now resilience or resilience and adaptation, actually they go together as I have been trying to indicate.

And if you look back at what we have done so far in this particular set of discussions, we have moved from conditions of vulnerability and precarity to conditions which fight those conditions, which resist those conditions and which, because of the “virtue” of the people, virtue within quotes, of learning to fight, learning to be resilient, learning to adapt. To be resilient is to be able to bounce back like I said, it is the ability to cope with severe stress, severe unequal conditions and injustice and yet survive. As critics like Sarah Bracke have said, “Do not call me resilient, when you call me resilient, it means you can do it to me again”. It is a good thing to keep in mind because what Sarah Brack is saying is that you can do whatever you want to me and it is my job to recover from that. You will not change your behaviour, you will not ensure safety and security to me.

What you will instead do is to say, “It is up to you, you evolve a mechanism, you fight, you toughen yourself up”. And you will meet this kind of discourse in public writings or self-help and all of those, you must toughen yourself up because the system will not change, the system will not save you, the system will not secure you. What it does is to say, it is entirely up to you. So, Sarah Bracke's argument and it is based on public protest where the women held up placards that said “Do not call me resilient, if you call me resilient means you can do it to me again”. As in every time like I said the city is caught

in a rush, the citizens adapt, the citizens become more resilient, the citizens learn to anticipate the problem. So that is our third element, third concept in the triad from vulnerability to resilience and adaptation. Thank you, see you soon again.