

Struggling for Reconstruction: Houses, Homes and “the State” after the Earthquake in Muzaffarabad, Azad Kashmir¹

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Abstract

In this paper I think of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan and Azad Kashmir as an “empirical window” on society providing insights into “common” rather than “exceptional” social processes, practices and power relations. With reference to my ethnographic fieldwork in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Azad Kashmir, I deal with local actors’ perspectives and practices related to the destruction and reconstruction of houses and homes in the earthquake’s aftermath. As an emic category of social practice in society “home” (ghar) refers to flexible arrangements of people, places, things and values, which are closely related to structures and processes of the larger society and the state. Rather than presenting final results, the paper points to some initial analysis of material, social and political processes of house and home examining how social actors re-construct and re-negotiate houses and homes in daily life and thereby struggle over values and resources vis-à-vis state reconstruction policies and activities targeting the house and home.

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In October 2005 a massive earthquake hit parts of the Pakistani Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the nearby State of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Almost 80 000 people died largely as a result of building collapse and over 3 million people were left homeless (EERI 2006). I conducted ethnographic fieldwork² near the epicentre of the earthquake, in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Azad Kashmir. Muzaffarabad, a city with almost 100 000 inhabitants, was one of the areas worst affected by the earthquake, not only in terms of fatalities, but also in terms of the scale of the damage to key infrastructure such as government buildings, schools, hospitals and people's homes.

My research concentrates on social actors' perspectives and practices related to the destruction and reconstruction of houses and homes in post-earthquake Muzaffarabad. I understand "home" (*ghar*) as a fundamental category of social practice in society referring to processes which shape, and are shaped by, local actors' vulnerabilities to the earthquake and strategies of coping with destruction and death. With reference to the anthropological literature on "natural" disasters (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002) I think of the earthquake as an "empirical window" (Jenness, Smith, and Stepan-Norris 2006, ix) on society providing insights into "common" rather than "exceptional" social processes, practices and power relations. The destruction and reconstruction of houses in the context of the earthquake and its aftermath, as I argue in this paper, reveal crucial material, social and political processes of home and disclose how social actors struggle over power relations in society.

Rather than presenting final results, the following

² The ethnographic fieldwork has been conducted between 2009 and 2011 and in two phases amounting to 15 months. Fieldwork was generously funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) and by the German Research Council (DFG)

examinations are meant to offer a glimpse into my ongoing research on social actors' notions and practices of home and consequential strategies of coping with constraints and dangers of daily life. I point to some initial analysis emphasising, most notably, political processes of home with reference to social actors' struggles over values and resources vis-à-vis state policies and activities targeting the house and home.

Destruction and Reconstruction of Houses and Homes

The widespread destruction of domestic dwellings by the earthquake revealed that homes were among the most affected social groups by the disaster. Confronted most with the consequences of the destructions of houses and the consequential losses of family members, properties and daily routines, homes were also mainly involved in dealing with these destructions and losses. Although my research is clearly located in the context of long-term reconstruction, rather than in that of emergency rescue and relief, I encountered quite often narratives about the immediate disaster's aftermath which point to the importance of homes in the context of initial disaster response. Many of these narratives of the earthquake tell about panic-stricken people who, first of all, rushed home in search of shelter and family members. The home (or what was left over from it) was *the* place to go in this situation of extreme distress. The home was maintained but simultaneously modified due to destruction and death. In the days, weeks and months after the disaster it was within these maintained and modified homes that people managed the living in temporary shelters (tents and barracks), the cooking, sleeping and emotional care for traumatised family members. Later, in the years following the earthquake, these homes engaged in the expensive and time-consuming reconstruction of houses which in many cases is still ongoing.

The intuitive orientation towards home illustrates that “home” (*ghar*) features not only a strong “sense of belonging” to a social group, the family, but also to a locality, the house (see Lovell 1998). Homes are *places* where families seek protection and care. The emic concept of “home” thus accentuates family and house, social relationships and material things, people and places. Ideally, a home is a social group, constructed of marital, parental and filial relationships, as well as a material building (*makan*) of a massive construction (stone, bricks, cement blocks or mud). The connotation with materiality reflects a particular ideal of the concept of home, namely the notion, that a home is located in a house which is occupied and owned (in legal terms) by a family. Social actors refer to *mera ghar* (“my home”) as the place where they eat, sleep, work, relax, receive and entertain guests together with the family. It is a place which is actively constructed and maintained by financial contributions (mostly paid by men) and housework (mostly performed by women). Because of this close association of home with house, the earthquake revealed that home is not only a place of protection and care but can become a site of brutal destruction and death. Although homes basically continued to exist during emergency, relief and reconstruction, the destruction of houses (and the death of family members under its rubble) entailed a sense of disruption, danger and *loss of home*.

With reference to home I argue that the social group, the family, and the material object, the house, participate “in a process of mutual definition” (Lovell 1998, 12). In other words, houses and homes are related by dialectical processes. The material house is thus not a mere symbol of the home but a participant in social actors’ family relationships and daily practices of home as well as in the processes which position homes and in relation to the larger society and the natural (and built) environment. Analysing the destruction of houses in

Hurricane Katharina in New Orleans, Justin Wilford (Wilford 2008) argues to take the materiality of buildings seriously and, thus, to resist conceiving them as mere representations of socially constructed meanings. According to his theoretical stance, inspired by anthropological perspectives frequently labelled as “new materialism”, meaning and materiality are dialectically related and bring each other into existence (Wilford 2008, 648; 659). Wilford examines the house as a “mediator object” (2008, 650) between society and nature. Ontologically, a house structures the meaning of nature for society. The building of a house attempts to control nature by constructing “an inside in opposition to an existing outside” (Kaika cit. in Wilford 2008, 651). In addition to the opposition nature/human the materiality of the house is also crucial in producing and maintaining the ordering binaries of public/private, shared/intimate, self/other and mine/not mine. The destruction of the house, as Wilford argues, disrupts the sense of social order because the materiality of the house, which produces and maintains social meanings of order in society, is transformed. This transformed materiality of the house, however, becomes itself meaningful for the home. Through the rebuilding of houses materiality participates in the re-constitution of the *meanings* of home. From this perspective, the material destruction and reconstruction of houses are closely linked with the re-negotiation and re-contestation of homes. Taking the dialectic of materiality and sociality into account, I argue that the re-construction of material houses affects, and is affected by, the re-constitution of families and homes..

Anthropology has been concerned with families (and households) for many decades (see Sanjek 2002). Instead of producing a universal definition, anthropologists attempt to analyse these groupings with reference to local perspectives and practices in particular situations and specific contexts by the means of emic concepts. But we must also account for the problem that one conclusive emic definition of what a home (or

a family) “is” does not exist. Social actors represent and practice family and home in different situations in different ways and, thereby, also challenge and dispute each others’ representations and practices. Consequently, homes are neither confined not static societal units but rather flexible and dynamic arrangements of people and places, things, values and practices which are frequently negotiated and contested between social actors in society. As a category of social practice, in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu (1979), “home” (*ghar*) refers to processes which are characterised by ambiguities in terms of house and family, place and people, separation and cooperation, solidarity and conflict.

Social relationships within homes alter over time through births, marriages and deaths of family members, whereby, also circumstances and conditions of daily cooperation change. Homes modify living arrangements over time, they separate and unite and, thus, adapt to new circumstances such as changing social compositions, emerging conflicts, shifting responsibilities, economic pressures and new space requirements.

It is, I believe, the practice of re-arranging and modifying living arrangements, both temporarily and permanently, which also turns out to be a very important strategy of coping with a social crisis such as the earthquake. Shifting the organisation of daily life from a rather “joint” living arrangement (of the extended family comprising the parents and their married sons or two or more married brothers) to a more “separate” living arrangement (of the nuclear family) homes are subject to social processes which are frequently referred to in the anthropological literature as the “developmental cycle” (Sanjek 2002, 286) of families (and households). Separation constitutes a general aspect of the histories of families and homes, even though these social processes are not strictly linear or circular. The term “cycle” is somehow misleading because it

suggests a unidirectional process in which a separated nuclear family grows to joint family until it reaches a certain size and then separates into nuclear families etc. In contrast, I conceive of the social processes of home as multidirectional. Depending on the situation, families may also dissolve their “separate” living arrangements and reunify in a “joint” family home. This happened, just to mention briefly an example from my field, in the case of parents who lived with their unmarried children in a village. Due to the severe destruction of the house and the land the family moved into the home of their married son who was already living in the city with his wife and children for many years. Since neither the son nor the parents own urban land they cooperate to purchase land in the city and to build a house together in future.

The analysis of processes of home requires examination of how material houses, family relationships and daily practices participate in these processes and continuously construct and reconstruct homes. Whereas houses locate homes and provide families with places where they practice relationships through daily cooperations and conflicts, families create and re-create houses as homes through symbolic relationships and social obligations. Thus, material destruction and reconstruction of houses shape, and are shaped by, negotiations and contestations of social relationships and practices of home.

Home as the Target of State Policies

As much as homes are not confined and static they are also not isolated but always positioned in certain ways within the structures of the larger society and the state.

Thus, local actors’ perspectives and practices of home must also be placed in the wider political and administrative context of reconstruction. A political effect of the destruction of houses (and homes), I argue, was to make the house (and home)

the target of state policies. “Housing” (the technical and somehow rationalised term for “homes”) became an important issue of bureaucratic administration and state intervention on the ground such as in damage assessments, housing compensation programs, and the provision of transitional prefabricated shelters.

The government of Pakistan set up a housing compensation program for a, so-called, owner-driven reconstruction of domestic dwellings. A reconstruction authority issued the compensation documents which entitled their holders to an amount of compensation according to the scale of damage to the house. The policy held that a *roof* was entitled to compensation, issued in instalments with, at most, 1.75 *lakh* rupees for a fully damaged house. By targeting roofs rather than the social groups who lived under that roof, the policy failed to cater for the diversity and flexibility of living arrangements. In fact, the “one-roof-one-compensation-logic” assumed that the physical “house” equated exactly with the social “home”. It was taken for granted that *one* house represents *one* home. Against this logic, people pointed to the fact that in a house different homes exist. One roof can be the roof for more than one home. Thus, compensating a house does not mean compensating a home. The policy was blamed for discriminating against more than one (nuclear family) home living together in one house. Accordingly, people demanded the married man (or woman), who represents the nuclear family, to be compensated rather than the house.

Officially, the policy was never abandoned. Nevertheless, it was in effect relaxed later on in so far as the authority went on to compensate married men (of the same house) who claimed ownership of a separate “house” which could have been only one room of a house, a simple construction for storage, or a building for livestock. Although widespread, this practice remained informal and was officially

represented by the authorities as deviant and exceptional.

This alleged deviance reveals that not only the policy's equation of house and home but the category of "house" as roof itself is highly problematic. What is a house? In the context of the local living arrangements this question is not easy to answer. Two brothers may live in separate homes but in the same house inherited from their father. The question inevitably arises whether the house is, in fact, two houses. In addition, families often live in compounds of houses comprising of separate living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, bathrooms and storage constructions. Are these, according to the policy, separate houses or not? If the bedroom of a married couple collapsed, but not the bedrooms of the parents, the brother etc., does the authority categorise this single construction as a house? I once talked to an official in charge of the housing program about such difficulties in determining a house. He appeared to be very convinced that there is no doubt about the house. He completely ignored my question of what a house is, possibly, because it struck him as absurd to question such a clearly identifiable object as a house. He adhered unswervingly to the "one-roof-one-compensation-policy" and the house/roof as the legitimate criterion for compensation. The cases which didn't adhere to this logic were denounced by him as fraud.

The approach taken by the state authorities did not allow for house and home as elusive and processual categories of social practice. These shortcomings effect the reconstruction of homes in various ways some of which I would like to outline briefly.

As a first consequence, the policy activated a general debate over "separate" and "joint" family homes in society. To some extent, it restricted local representations of family and home. Social actors tended to represent their homes as separate nuclear families to claim and legitimise separate compensation. At the same time, it was sometimes also assumed that the so-

called “joint family system” declined exactly because of separate housing compensation and the nuclear family bias of relief in general. This representation, however, was also strategic. The assumption of the decline of the joint family system serves to justify deviance from certain dominant values and ideals of home such as patrilinear solidarity and patrilocal residence. The post-disaster situation provided families in certain cases for opportunities to separate instead of maintaining the former joint family home. But, the separation of homes was in no way an unavoidable consequence of the compensation policy. A home could have strategically represented itself as two separate homes (to claim separate compensation) but then reconstructed a common house together. According to the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1976) representations are always incomplete and politically restricted reflections of everyday practices, but this is exactly how people effectively strategise in daily life.

The assumption about the decline of the joint family system in the earthquake-affected areas alludes to a general ongoing debate in society about social values about how families should live together. In fact this debate around the “home” has been ongoing for many decades. The living in nuclear families reflects an increasing social reality which is not simply the product of the post-disaster situation and the distribution of relief. Modernity and the dominant ideology of the nuclear family constitute a global trend to smaller household size (Sanjek 2002, 287) to which relief and reconstruction assistance more than likely contribute. Preceding the earthquake this trend produces diversity and a situation where different values and practices of family coexist and sometimes contradict one another. The boundaries between “separate” and “joint” homes, which people may draw in representation, are very much blurred in everyday practice (see also Schild 2012).

As a second consequence, the housing policy increasingly placed people in competition with one another for compensation money. Discrimination and bribes were rife in the process of getting claims for compensation recognised exactly because the house is such an elusive category which can hardly be fixed. The shortcoming of the housing compensation policy to account for this elusiveness broadened up the space for corruption. Thereby also differences of access to social and economic resources were revealed. Without connections to the relevant officers in charge of the compensations and without financial means people were more likely to be rejected as beneficiaries. Thus, also mistrust and suspicion was created among families and neighbours. Even today, people blame others for practices of bribery and favouritism regarding compensation and the distribution of relief in general.

As a third consequence, the housing policy reproduces the vulnerability of homes to future disasters. The amount of compensation was very low given the actual cost of building a house according to the earthquake-resistant type of construction. The value of the amount was further eroded because of rising inflation. People state that they have to spend at least 4 *lakh* rupees for the construction of a small house (two rooms, one kitchen, one bathroom). In many cases, they lost, to a considerable degree, much bigger and more complex houses than a simple two room dwelling. In comparison with the value of the property destroyed, compensation amounted to no more than a small reconstruction subsidy. Five years after the earthquake, many homes had still not rebuilt or retrofitted permanent houses, mostly, due to financial difficulties. In addition, the people in Muzaffarabad also face political restrictions on the permanent reconstruction of houses, either because their area of settlement is declared as hazardous by city planners or their private land has to be acquired for implementation of reconstruction projects such as the

construction of roads and shopping complexes. In order to avoid the situation where newly reconstructed homes obstructed city projects, the construction of permanent buildings is still restricted in some city areas. The government, thus, promoted the construction of so-called temporary shelters (CGICGI-sheet constructions). In many cases, people invested their (compensation) money in temporary constructions while the issue of permanent housing remains unsolved. In other cases people started to reconstruct permanent houses in spite of the hazards surrounding them or without considering earthquake resistant building codes. Thus, for many families, their homes are (still) dangerous places. They are aware of the possible dangers of destruction and death in future earthquakes and landslides (the latter are frequent during rains in winter) but unable to avoid them. According to Oliver-Smith, such dilemmas are the essence of social vulnerabilities to disasters (see also Oliver-Smith 2002, 42). The dilemmas in the case of reconstruction of permanent and earthquake-resistant houses illustrate that, despite of the housing compensation program, the reconstruction of homes in Muzaffarabad was to a large extent neglected by state policies and authorities.

This neglect points to boundaries of “the state” which are drawn by reconstruction policies and authorities between “public” and “private” issues of housing. These boundaries deprive social actors, especially those who are poor, of resources for permanent construction and reproduce their vulnerabilities to future disasters. These political consequences of reconstruction refer to general processes linked with disasters. As pointed out by Edward Simpson, the post-disaster situation frequently creates the opportunity for a state to expand its influence in a local context by establishing itself as the principal provider of relief, reconstruction and development to its population (Simpson 2005). This “enlarged state” (Simpson 2005, 230) is allowed to emerge with the support of the international system

of relief which allocates the required funds. Legitimated by the disaster, the state has to take care of the affected population by mitigating and administrating the disaster's consequences in society. It derives, I would argue, from the specific rationality behind the idea of the nation-state that a disaster must be "governed" according to "rational" bureaucracy (see Foucault [1991] 2006). Disasters, therefore, inevitably entail the emergence of a "disaster bureaucracy". This process impacts the existing state-society relations by confronting local actors in unprecedented ways with "the state", its bureaucracies, policies and officials.

The effect of the state is ambivalent since there are issues of reconstruction which are not covered by state policies as already mentioned. In many cases people rely on their own resources (savings, properties, networks) and capabilities to strategise for reconstruction of their homes.

Although in a different way, people themselves draw such boundaries as well. In some cases, they demand assistance from the state and comply with the official policies of urban planning. Buildings codes are, then, considered and restrictions respected. But, in other cases, people contradict state policies by ignoring restrictions, encroaching on (government) land, faking permission documents for construction, and bribing state officials to build illegal constructions (such as permanent houses in hazardous areas). These practices are frequently legitimised and directed by the notion that certain realms are not or should not be "of the state's business". The construction of the boundaries of the state is subject to complex negotiations between state and non-state actors. The practice of taking and giving bribes, for instance, is especially important for negotiations over the state's boundaries and strategies of mitigating the states influence in everyday contexts of home. This clearly indicates that reconstruction is also carried out, so to speak, "beyond the state". In this regard it is equally

important to examine where “the state is” as well as “where it is not”. Timothy Mitchell ([1999] 2006) argues that it is exactly this notion of boundaries between “state” and “society” which provide the means of the exercise of political power by the state. The separation of non-state (or “private”) and state (or “public”) issues of reconstruction itself must be seen as an effect of power which structures people’s notions, representations and practices of home.

En-Countering the Everyday State at Home

Because of the “enlarged state” and the emergence of a “disaster bureaucracy”, post-disaster contexts qualify well for “ethnographies of the state” (Gupta 1995). The Anthropology of disasters, I argue, must also involve the study of “the state”.

Conceptualising the state as a cultural artefact anthropology enables to move beyond common assumptions which reify the state and take it as a given, distinct and unitary entity and to understand “it” as a multilayered, fragmented, contradictory and translocal arrangement of institutions, practices and people. Studying the state, we are concerned with the questions of what a state means to its people, how it is instantiated in their daily lives and where its boundaries are drawn (Sharma and Gupta 2006).

Homes’ encounters with “the state”, its policies and officials are in particular numerous in the context of housing, even though, they are not limited to it. Homes are also targeted in various ongoing reconstruction and development projects conducted by state institutions. It seems to be a general global trend within the “regime of development” to target domestic groups as beneficiaries, rather than individuals, for development programs (for example Carr 2005). A consequence of this focus on homes is probably that the implementation of projects increasingly necessitates home visits of state officials to, first,

survey the homes and, then, select the beneficiaries among them. Anyhow, these visits and the talking they produce among social actors are a vital source for my study of both, how social actors encounter “the state”, interact with its officials and participate in projects as well as how these encounters, interactions and practices shape the ways in which “the state” comes to be imagined, represented as well as contested in the everyday.

These encounters often entail great expectations and hopes of people to get money and material resources from state institutions. But, at the same time, they are also accompanied by doubts and mistrust of “the corrupt state”, rumours of projects which contradict official versions, strategies of shunning visiting officials, bribing them and underreporting in their surveys.

An example from my field further illustrates the complexity of people’s encounters with “the state”. During my fieldwork, the city authority started to conduct a survey in the nearby hazardous area to select the homes who are to be shifted to a safe place, the so-called satellite town. When these survey activities started rumours immediately erupted in the neighbourhood that the authority will in fact distribute prefabricated houses and not (or not only) plots in the satellite towns. These prefabs were distributed to the people until a year ago but then the donor stopped the provision of additional prefabs. Many families who were promised to receive a temporary house were not provided with one. These temporary houses are very popular among the people. They provide safe and additional living space which may also be rented out to landless city dwellers. The survey for the satellite towns resembled the procedures of the prefab distribution for which people were visited at home and registered in lists by the same authority. To me it seemed that people took the opportunity to remind the authority of its old promise and to (re-)articulate their interest vis-à-vis “the state”. At the same time, people

clearly expressed, although in a concealed manner, their refusal to leave their homes and to shift to a new place. They got themselves registered in the lists for the satellite town, but only because of the prefabs they claimed to receive together with the plots. I was told that they would dismantle the house and bring it back to their old locality. Some officials themselves confirmed and actively promoted the version of the prefabs whereas their boss, the chairman of the authority, to whom I talked on the project as well, clearly denied the distribution of prefabs. He maintained the official version of the satellite town and the provision of plots (and not of prefabs) to people living in hazardous areas.

How to make sense of this confusing story? I basically take it as a case of local encounters with “the state”. The rumours display people’s mistrust against “the state” and its bureaucrats as well as the mistrust of low ranking officials against their superiors. People don’t trust the official information because they suspect (high-ranking) officials lying to them in order to safeguard the prefabs for themselves, their relatives and friends. In order to prevent such a situation social actors put forward their own version of the project which aims at protecting their interests against the corrupt officers.

These strategies reflect “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott 1985) to top-down activities of a state and its bureaucracy which are imagined by common people as hardly accessible and accountable to them. Nevertheless, people attempt at manipulating the project and mitigating the state’s influence by the means of rumours in neighbourhoods. James Scott describes these anonymous and low profile forms of resistance as “weapons of the weak” (1985), namely practices of lower classes and poor who lack opportunities and resources for more public and open forms of resistance which, in Muzaffarabad, are mainly confined to a small privileged group of well-off politicians, NGO workers and journalists. This also indicates

that resistance to “the state” must be analysed with reference to specific situations and particular positions of people within the power structures of society. I conceive “resistance” to be as fragmented as “the state” itself. It is the situational practice responding to everyday constraints faced by people which flexibly adapts to the state’s blurred boundaries, uneven existence and contradictory nature.

Considering homes in the context of the earthquake’s aftermath and reconstruction process provides insights not only into social actors’ practices of coping with destruction and death but also into local encounters with “the state” and the, often, hidden struggles over power relations in (post-disaster) society. Thereby, homes, frequently conceived as private (and female) domains in opposition to public (and male) domains of politics, government and administration, are revealed and recognised as social, material and political processes in which local actors, men as well as women, struggle over values, resources and power relations and strategies for coping with constraints and dangers of daily life vis-à-vis state policies, institutions and officials.

Much work is yet to be done in order to gain a more profound and empirically grounded understanding of how categories of social practice in society such as “home” and “the state” intersect and shape each other. As I attempted to demonstrate in this paper, disasters and their material, social and political implications for people and their homes provide opportunities to study such intersections.

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