

# UNIT 11 RUMOUR AND PANIC MANAGEMENT

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## 11.0 Learning Outcome

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After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the meaning of rumour;
- provide a comprehensive view of the concept of panic; and
- explain the various measures of managing of panic situations.

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## 11.1 Introduction

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Rumour is a false story that is passed from mouth to mouth from one person to another. People used rumour as a tool in their own interest. Rumour may be related with a persons, incidence or group. Rumour is generally based on half truth floats from one person to another. As it travels from person to person its forms change completely. Everybody try to add something more as per his wishes, motives and interest. Emotional elements are there in rumour; therefore, people do not think logically and accept the heard story.

Panic is the situation when people feel that there may be a possibility for any disaster like - earthquake, flood, drought, their behaviour change completely. They become active for their future days. Behaviours such as shifting to safe places, storage of food etc. may be seen. People feel restless and panic. In panic external behaviour of the person changes as

well as functions of internal organs also change. Sympathetic nervous system becomes more active. But in panic people cannot stay longer. To maintain the mental equilibrium situation must be managed properly. So that people may live healthy and happy life.

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## **11.2 Meaning of Rumour**

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Generally news based on half truth floats from person to another is called rumour. It may be related with a person, group or incidence. As the news travels from one person to another its form changes and in this way it becomes deformed and exaggerated. In transferring the news the person colours it with his interests, views, inspiration and attitude.

James A. Drever defined rumour in his dictionary of psychology, "Rumour is an unverified story, circulating in a community, alleging the occurrence of a certain event." International Encyclopaedia of the social sciences describes as - rumour are those descriptions, forecasts or explanations of events that are shaped largely in informal encounters and that have not been confirmed by authoritative sources, but are, entertained seriously by a substantial portion of an interested collective body.

Rumour is regarded as a message that is passed from person to person, assuming that the first speaker in the chain is an eyewitness, whose report is accurate and that distortions are introduced in the course of transmission. The special characteristic is that the individual who communicates the rumour makes no effort to enquire into its truth and validity. The basic unit of analysis is the report and the central problem is to account for its transformation.

Emotional elements are there in the rumour therefore, it is illogical and fanciful. People believe the story easily and show restlessness in carrying it to others. The impact of rumour is so powerful that it takes little time to reach from one person to another. No one may say from where the rumour has originated once it spreads among the people.

Even it becomes difficult to find an eyewitness to the incident, whereas everyone reports that he has heard it.

On 26 January 2001, an earthquake measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale rocked the state of Gujarat. The earthquake and its aftershock affected nearly 15.9 million people. The earthquake was so severe that shocked the people deeply. Again after few days the news was spread about the reoccurrence of earthquake. The feared people easily believed the news and tried to keep themselves on safer place. In fact there were no authentic news behind this message. The only reason was rumour based on emotional elements spreads very quickly.

In state of tension or war rumour also spreads with amazing rapidity because all persons are fearful and tense, therefore they easily believe almost anything. In wartime, some egocentric individuals wilfully spread rumours to attain their own degraded interests. Even otherwise there is no death of such individual in the society who would wilfully spread any kind of injurious rumour concerning any individual to further their own low interests.

All that has so far been said of rumour is sufficient to make explicit its psychological tendency. Thus we find that there are two main characteristics of rumour are – importance and ambiguity.

A rumour spreads according to the importance of the incident or individual. The more important a person is for the group or the society the more are chances of rumour spreading about him.

Ambiguity serves as a rich soil for growth and spreading of rumour. If there is no ambiguity and the situation is intelligible, there is no possibility of spreading of rumour. It is difficult to know the correct situation during war, communal riots, floods, earthquakes and similar situations. So these conditions serve as an ideal medium for spreading rumours from the psychological viewpoint the structure of rumour is expressed by the following formula:

$$\text{Rumour} = \text{Importance} \times \text{Ambiguity}$$

The above formula indicates that rumour is in proportion to the product of importance and ambiguities are the essential elements of rumour. Rumour cannot exist in the event of one of the two being utterly absent. If any important incident happens and there is no element of ambiguity, in such a condition, rumour cannot circulate. All post and postman, the great psychologists worked a lot in this field, stated that "the relation between importance and ambiguity is not additive but multiplicative, for if either importance or ambiguity is zero, there is no rumour."

Excitement about the news is also very important in spreading of rumour. Rumour spreads rapidly when excitement is intense. This situation emerges mostly in catastrophe or in the heat of mob action. In such situation critical ability of people are relaxed. New communication channels emerge spontaneously. Rumour content then becomes consistent with the prevailing mood as fear, anger or joy. Rumours are shaped in a selective process, and the basis of selection varies with intensity of collective excitement.

### **A case study of rumour**

On 27 December night there was strong rumour in Chennai on the background of Sh. Karunanidhi's deteriorating health who is the President of DMK Party, which made the whole atmosphere very tense. "Is Sh. Karunanidhi all right?" This question, which started as murmur at noon but grew louder and louder as the day wore on, was quelled only after Sh. Karunanidhi appeared on the local T.V. channel at about 8.30 p.m. and reassured the people that he was all right. He did look normal nothing seemed amiss about him. And thus the atmosphere, which had been vitiated by free floating rumours over his deteriorating health, was at least cleared. It was a classic example of 'incident within incident' since already burdened police force was to attend the situation. Though the rumour was fast spread in afternoon, and grew louder and louder as the day was passing, the clarification could have been immediate to curtail subsequent panic.

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### 11.3 What is Panic?

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The word panic derives from the name of the Greek God Pan, who strikes fear into the enemies of his subjects. Panic is a sudden fear which dominates or replaces thinking and affects group of people or animals. Generally panic occurs in disaster situation and it may affect the overall health of an individual or the affected group.

McDougall (1920) described panic as the "collective intensification of the instinctive excitement with its emotion of fear and its impulse no flight". (P.36)

Whereas another psychologist Schultz (1964) defines panic behaviour in terms of (1) intense inner terror and loss of self control (2) flight, (3) maladaptive of such flight for the survival of the group. In disaster situation people become panic and restless. The inner fear makes them hyper active and so fight or flight responses are seen. For example if a crowd finds itself in a theatre that has caught fire. People in the crowd feel there is no hope of escaping, if they believe in a civilised, orderly fashion, awaiting their turn to exit. The only chance of escape is if they rush to exit by pushing everybody, even at considerable risk.

When people encounter any panic situation the brain experiences a cascade of responses. It works like this: first, visual and other sensory information rushes to the thalamus, which then directs the information where it needs to go. According to Dr. Diane McIntosh, a clinical psychiatrist, in post traumatic stress disorder, only amygdala functions, where there are no thought only reactions. Normally, in human being 95 per cent of the information is meant for other quarters of the mind, like the hippocampus and the cerebral cortex. This flight or flight response is not only in the mind but translates into the body. The sympathetic nervous system gets active. As soon as the sympathetic nervous system activate there is a surge in chemicals called catecholamine, which increases the heart rate and blood pressure and release sugar to power the muscles. This chemical reaction makes the

people proactive. People can do any challenging job when sympathetic nervous system is active. But it is not a sustainable state. Very soon the hypothalamic pituitary axis releases hydrocortisone, which brings the body back to equilibrium.

Human beings usually panic in situation that have previously been socially defined as fearful or terrifying. There is often a preliminary build up of anticipation and tension which involves rumour, decision and the like.

### **Panic Situation Caused by Tsunami 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2004**

As a result of an earth quake of 8.9 on Richter scale that struck Sumatra island on 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2004. Giant Tsunami travelled westwards whereby Andaman Nichobar islands along with coastal areas of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Pondicherry were damaged resulting in a high loss of human lives. The death toll in India has crossed over ten thousand .Though all the 13 districts on the coastal line of the Taminadu state were affected by Tsunami ,the worst affected were Cuddalore, Nagapattinam and Kanyakumari. In Nagapattinam district, out of five coastal talukas namely: Sirkazi; Tharangambadi; Nagapattinam; Kilvelur and Vedaranyam, Nagapattinam taluka was the most affected.

### **Rumour create panic in Nagai**

A news as reported in New Indian Express confirms that Nagapattinam district is slowly limping back to normalcy as the govt machinery intensified it rescue and relief operations. The relief operations had been hampered as rumour of yet another Tsunami hitting the coast triggered panic in the area. The fear was so intense that instead of receiving aid, people ran to move for safer places. To control the panic situation district administration had to make tremendous effort by setting up 11 committees to over see the relief works.

### **A case of Sri Lanka false tsunami warning**

In Sri Lanka on 28th January 2005, in the south the people yelled "Duwanna, duwanna!" and in the east, "Odu, Odu!" but they all meant the minority Tamil eastern coastal areas fled their homes in a panic after

a false tsunami alarm. Since the tsunami hit the Sri Lankan coastline in December, earthquake aftershocks have caused panic among people. Though the government made a desperate effort to calm the public and assure them that the tsunami warning was only a rumour. In spite of that panic was so intense coastal residents were not agree to believe that tsunami warning was a false alarm.

Other similar events occurred in India too. Almost a week after the tsunami disaster, mass panic spread as warning of another tsunami was sounded. The government of India issued a radio warning after incorrectly interpreting aftershock tremors as powerful enough to trigger a tsunami.

On the basis of studies on tsunami victims it is found that the fear caused by the powerful tsunami has created a psychosis which makes it nearly impossible for survivors to distinguish between fact and rumour.

In one of his studies Dr. Athula Sumathipla, a Sri Lankan researcher and clinical psychologists at Kings College in London worked with tsunami victims and found that panic is created easily because people are sensitive to tsunami information. Sumanthipla explains that "People are already hyper aroused - even with the slightest stimuli, they react disproportionately. Thoughts flow in fast and they act upon it".

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## **11.4 Management of Panic**

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In disaster either natural or man-made generally people become restless and panic. Situation is beyond the control of people and they are so frightened so they behave abnormally. This psychological state of mind affects people's mental as well as physical health also. In such situation people do not behave logically and in few cases people are willing to accept suggestions very easily whether relevant or not. Therefore, the situation is very harmful for people as well as the society. This panic situation can be minimised or reduced considerably if it is handled properly. Educationists, sociologists, psychologists all are working in this area for better management of panic. To

minimise the impact of panic during disaster some suggestions given by experts are as follows:

**a) First-aid**

In management of panic, it is very relevant that people must be taught about the use of first aid during crisis like - fire, accident etc. This provides them greater confidence. Providing training of first-aid skills among people, the fear during panic can be minimised. They can be educated for useful actions instead of blind panic. For example, in case of fire, pouring cold water, use of blankets etc. will be useful, instead of creating havoc.

**b) Practice regularly**

Once people are educated about disaster and the method to fight with it, they can learn to handle the panic situation more efficiently instead of being panic. People should practice these skills off and on to keep themselves in touch with these exercises. Soldiers are the best example as - they drill endlessly to create an automatic fallback during crisis. Appropriate disaster responses like - fire drills, drowning rescues etc. can be done with family members to keep ourselves in practice.

**c) Be ready for worst**

Imagination of worst situation like - any kind of disaster reduces the shock as one faces suddenly in the present. By imagining about the worst people can evaluate every aspects of loss they may face during disaster. It also gives an insight to people how to handle the crisis tactfully and not to create blind panic.

**d) Make the priorities**

During disaster when people suffer from panic, cannot visualise as to what they have to save first. They attempt to save all their wealth and goods. But in sea, professional use different scale. Red stands for critically injured people; yellow for moderate injury or illness; green is good to go. If there appears to

be time, coast guard rescuers take the reds off the blazing ship first so they can be treated. But if the ship's about to blow, they grab the greens and run. This logic can be applied in disaster for the greatest good.

## **Role of Media**

During disaster role of media also play very important role in management of panic. In crisis people are panic so rumour spreads very rapidly. In this age of science, through proper communication situation can be handled easily. During disaster, the media can play the role of relaying the measures that are being taken and monitoring them, cautioning the affected or to be affected people about the dos and don'ts, of scotching rumours and preventing panic and confusion. In reducing panic during the onslaught of disaster, what is utmost important is to keep the morale of the people high, to create self confidence in them. Another vital role of media is to present a clear picture of the situation and also encounter the exaggerated and negative reporting and propaganda in foreign media or the occurrence of the disaster.

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## **11.5 Conclusion**

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This unit has discussed the meaning of rumour. Rumour is a false story and it passes from one person to another very rapidly. As it travels its forms change completely. People add some new facts according to their wishes and interests. Importance and ambiguity two are the main characteristics of rumour. Rumour spreads rapidly and effectively when situation is ambiguous and excitement is high about the subject.

Panic has also discussed in this unit. Generally panic occurs in disaster situation or crisis. During disaster people find themselves helpless. They feel there is no hope of escaping. In spite of such fear they try utmost to make them safe, hence the situation become panic. To reduce this panicky some measures have been suggested by the experts to manage it. By adopting these measures one can handle the situation tactfully instead of blind panic.

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## **11.6 Key Concepts**

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**Motives** - impels a person to action

**Explicit** - unreserved

**Maladaptive** - Emotional instability, bad adjustment

**Amygdola** - part of the brain

**Propaganda** - an organised scheme.

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## **11.7 References and Further Reading**

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- 1) Sills, David L. (1968), International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 13, The Macmillan Co. and the free press.
- 2) Allport Gordon W., Postman Leo 1947, The Basic Psychology of Rumour, New York : Holt.
- 3) Alfred Edition, Social Psychology, by Holt, Rinchart and Winston, Inc.

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## **11.8 Activities**

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- 1) Discuss the main characteristics of rumour.
- 2) What measure can be used to minimise the panic during disaster?