By **Piyoosh Rautela**

LIFESTYLE CHANGE

FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

A psychological change and not just rules, regulations and institutions are needed for disaster risk reduction. Voluntary compliance of safety norms can be brought about only through sustained investment and creation of innovative ways of risk communication.
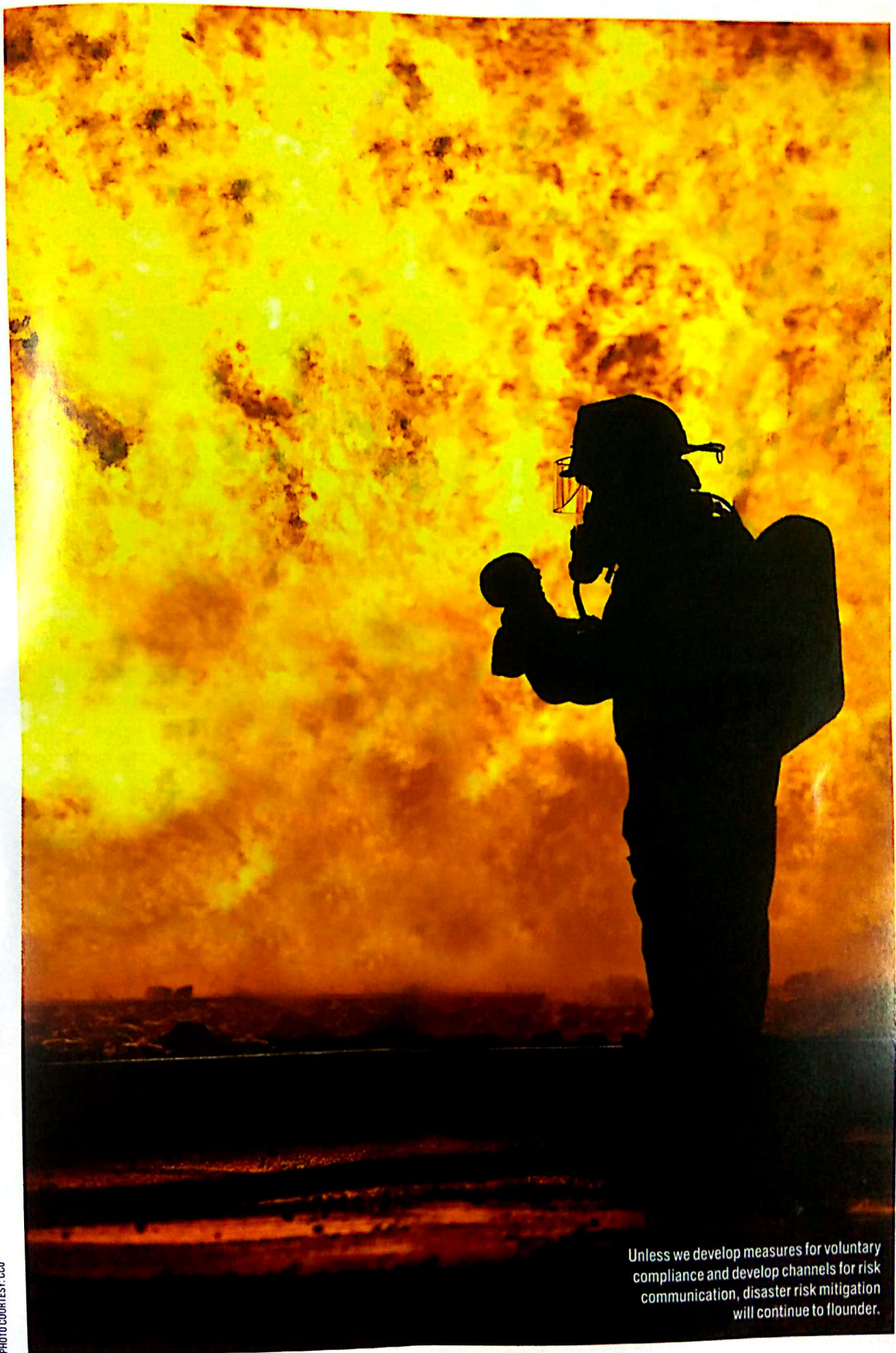
Unless we develop measures for voluntary compliance and develop channels for risk communication, disaster risk mitigation will continue to flounder.

Our obsession with rules, regulations, codes, laws and bye-laws does seem unending and we often refuse to act unless there happens to be one directing us to do so. This has resulted in perhaps the largest and the most comprehensive compendium of written laws in our country. We therefore have a written dictum for everything that we can think of. Despite this, we are not really a law abiding community and manage to find ways and means of bypassing all norms that are in place.

Thinking of legislation as being the remedy to all our woes, we were quick to enact the Disaster Management Act after suffering the Gujarat earthquake and the Indian Ocean tsunami in quick succession (Tiwari, 2015). This brought into existence disaster management authorities at the centre, together with those at the state and district levels. Though designated as being authorities, the very legislation creating these bodies have deprived them of any authority or executive powers. Instead, powers are vested solely in national and state executive committees. Moreover, most of these authorities consist of ex-officio functionaries and do not have the required manpower to undertake secretarial functions.

This, however, is not the reason for us being repeatedly affected by disasters and that too of increasing magnitude. One needs to acknowledge that framing of rules or putting organisations in place is not going to solve our problems, particularly in spheres that are related to our behaviour and habits. Analysis of disaster incidences of previous years would leave one with no option but to agree that most of these were creation of our own actions.

It can thus be safely concluded that voluntary compliance is the key to the success of disaster risk reduction initiatives and this has to be based on three cardinal pillars: (i) risk communication, (ii) devising and disseminating easy to understand and implementable solutions; and (iii) skill impartment.

Risk communication: Why should one discontinue what he has been doing for generations unless he has a valid reason to do so? We must accept that the masses are not aware of the risks they are exposed to, particularly in local contexts. No one would otherwise knowingly jeopardise the safety of their loved ones. So the risk posed by locally relevant hazards has to be assessed in the local context and at a scale on which some practical action can be initiated on ground.

The risk related information should be made available in an easily understandable manner to the masses and designed to motivate them to look for tools and techniques to reduce their risks. One size, however, does not fit all—different strategies have to be therefore devised for different audiences and media can play a major role in this. We have to realise that the media has an overwhelming impact on our thinking, behaviour, actions and lifestyle. Perhaps unconsciously, but what we do, eat and purchase is often decided by the media.

Despite fully understanding the importance of mass awareness for voluntary compliance of disaster safety measures, adequate resources have not been earmarked for the same and the awareness drives being run at present are poorly conceived and designed, lacking in imagination, creativity and continuity, remaining sporadic at best. Thus the desired purpose is not achieved.

Risk reduction tools: In case we are successful in communicating risk information, it would naturally create demand for solutions. One must agree that risk mitigation requires attention as most of the information available presently is laced with technical jargon and is not easily available in easily accessible vernacular that can be used by the masses.

Technical institutions bear the responsibility of providing this information in a format that is both easy to understand and implementable. Moreover, these solutions should be universally applicable and not specifically aimed at catering to a specific section of the society. Once this is done, various strategies must be worked out for the mass propagation of these tools. Apart from the media, financial institutions and insurance companies have a major role to play in this.

Skill impartment: We must understand that most construction is non-engineered; site selection, design, layout and reinforcement detailing are thus decided upon by the house owner in consultation with the contractor or the mason. At the same time we do not have any institutional mechanism in the country for training bricklayers and bar benders; they learn through experience and what they learn need not always be correct. Construction by these masons and contractors can therefore add to the

vulnerability of the built environment (Akadiri, 2012). Therefore a conscious effort is required for imparting hands on practical training to masons and contractors for disaster safe construction techniques (GOI-UNDP Disaster Risk Management Programme, 2002). For this initiative to succeed it is necessary to generate demand of trained masons in the market.

Land use regulations with suitable implementation mechanisms and penal provisions have to be put in place to restrict human activities in identified vulnerable areas. Simple tools should be developed for assessing the suitability of the site and ideas can be sought from the traditional practices of the local people.

Endnote

To conclude, it can be said that for the success of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDER, 2015), it is highly important to assess and communicate risk of locally pertinent hazards in an effective manner. This needs optimal media involvement, so as to create demand for solutions, and provide these in a format that could be deciphered, implemented and utilised by people at the grassroot level. A cadre of trained personnel must be created for implementing disaster safe technologies on the ground.

This is, however, not a simple task; it demands a change in our very psyche where safety becomes a habit. It would be too much to expect from one desisting to wear helmet to worry about and take preventive measures for warding off the threat of a disaster that may or may not happen in near future. Sustained and dedicated efforts are therefore a must. 𝖌𝖞

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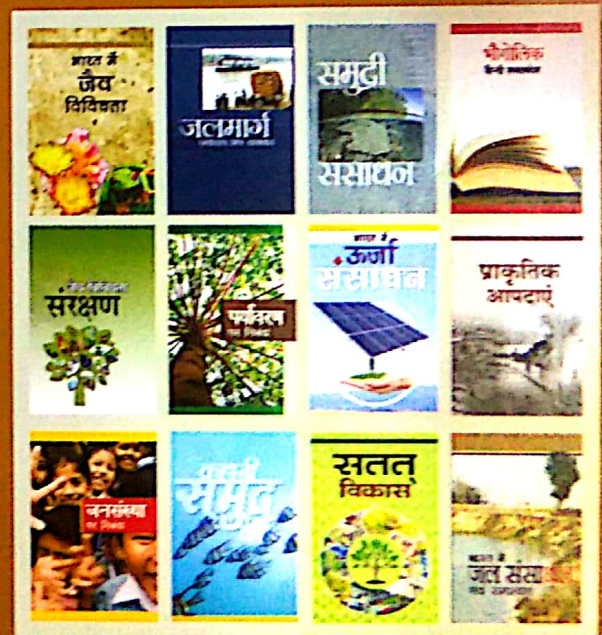United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Management, 2015. Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030. Available at: https://bit.ly/2ICrj1S

The author is Executive Director, Department of Disaster Management, Govt. of Uttarakhand. rautelapiyoosh@gmail.com