
A Micro-history of a Forgotten Disaster

DEBJANI BHATTACHARYYA

Chennai saw an unprecedented water crisis this year, even as flooding paralysed lives across many parts of South Asia, from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, to Assam in the North East, and to Mumbai in the west of India. The annual cycle of cyclones, floods and droughts increasingly structures life across the subcontinent. Sunil Amrith (2018) while tracing the imperial history of monsoon management from the latter half of the 19th century proposes monsoon as an analytic to understand the geopolitics of South and South East Asia. These annual cycles of natural calamities are nested in a long history of imperialism and postcolonial state-making. For instance, environmentalist Nityanand Jayaraman (2019) reminds us in context of Chennai's water crisis that the city ran out of water more than a century ago, when the British began centralised water projects in 1876. According to Jayaraman, these projects ushered in a new paradigm that severed any relation between humans, land, and water. As a result, Jayaraman affirms that any solution to these crises must restore "our broken relationship with water and land."

Following the 2005 flooding of Mumbai, landscape architects Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha (2009) urged us to change our visual literacy around land-water relationships, a process which would require us to understand that the sea and monsoon are partners in shaping the grounds of our settlement, rather than looking at these as natural elements that must be managed and kept at bay. Mumbai, they reminded us, is soaked annually by monsoon rains. Their work documented the profound historical shift from "soak" to flood as our systems of living with water transformed over the past centuries. From historians to environmental activists

BOOK REVIEWS

An Imperial Disaster: The Bengal Cyclone of 1876 by Benjamin Kingsbury, *New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Books, 2019; pp xviii + 210, ₹399.*

and landscape architects, all alert us to the long history of disasters, which neither come out of the blue, nor end with the receding flood or the disappearing cyclone.

Recent scholars, especially sociologists, historians, and anthropologists have increasingly turned to disaster as an object of scholarly inquiry as massively disruptive tsunamis, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and wildfires are decimating landscapes, displacing and drowning scores of people, cattle, and animals, and destroying capital. Disasters, they remind us, are political: they begin before the calamity strikes and persist after the event has disappeared from our immediate phenomenal world. Sociologist Kenneth Hewitt (1983), for instance, tells us that disasters are neither natural, nor spectral, but instead are the texture of everyday life in many parts of the world and the manifestation of a disaster depends on the social hierarchies.

Historical privilege predetermines the losers when cyclones, drought or any other calamity strikes. Thus, instead of studying "natural" calamities as "natural," they should be treated as events embedded in historical dimensions of people's relation to their habitat and the existing sociopolitical landscape (Hewitt 1983). In the post-Katrina moment, scholars have documented how race, poverty, deferred maintenance, and organised ignorance shape disasters and hence must all be central to the study of disaster (Frickle and Vincent 2007; Knowles 2014; Nixon 2011). Amites Mukhopadhyay's (2016) recent ethnography of embankment loss and

reconstruction in Sundarbans explains what it means to live with disasters on an everyday basis. This testifies to an everyday structured through land loss, caused by flood and salination on the one hand, and land acquisition without compensation for the government's embankment projects on the other.

Within this burgeoning literature on monsoon, floods, and cyclones, Benjamin Kingsbury's *An Imperial Disaster: The Bengal Cyclone of 1876* offers us a micro-history of a cyclone that appeared as a storm wave which reached a height of 40 feet, drowning 2,15,000 people and killing another 1,00,000 in the epidemics that followed. He meticulously traces the making of the storm as a "human and historical event," which was shaped by the "patterns of exploitation" endemic to the 19th-century Bengal countryside, nested within larger political and economic disparities of imperial rule (p xiii). Kingsbury places the event-history of the cyclone within a long period of agrarian transformation, deforestation, governance of embankments and post-disaster relief policies. The narrative arc is organised through six chapters about the history of the estuary, the forest, the cyclone, the epidemic that followed, and its aftermath.

The temporality of the cyclone begins with the late-18th-century destruction of the textile and salt industries in eastern Bengal (present Bangladesh). The cyclone affected the Meghna estuary, which had been deforested a mere half-century before it. The "earth-hungry" imperial machinery and their rent-seeking Indian intermediaries satiated their appetite for revenue through mangrove clearance and reclamation of recently formed alluvion (Graham-Sumner 1913). The poor migrants who had moved to these alluvial flats were defenceless against the rising tides of the merciless Bay of Bengal, once their only protection—the mangroves—were turned into agrarian landscape.

Imposed Immiseration

Before the arrival of the British merchants, both Noakhali and Bakarganj, two places devastated by the cyclone of

1876, had a thriving textile production and the province was renowned for cotton and muslins. It was a province where merchants and weavers were not the only prosperous people, but so too were people employed at every stage of production from cotton cultivators to bleachers, including many women spinners who had achieved some degree of economic independence (p 10). The late-18th-century invention of the spinning mule in Britain, coupled with protectionist import policies of the East India Company shut out the Bengal weavers and began a long process of immiseration, where weavers, cultivators and the people employed in various sectors of the textile industry found themselves “thrown onto the land” and were some of the early settlers upon the newly formed alluvial flats (called as “char”) close to the mouth of the Bay of Bengal (p 10).

Salt manufacture, the other thriving Mughal trade in the region, reached a similar fate as the British assumed monopoly over salt manufacturing and imposed a salt tax, making the salt department notorious for the exploitation it inflicted upon its workers. From 1832, the salt manufacture was stopped and large quantities of British salt began to enter the country, further immiserating an already impoverished population. Salt makers, much like those employed in the textile industry, turned to cultivation, cattle-keeping and taking herds to pasture on the newly formed chars.

The collapse of both these industries and the resultant immiseration was also followed by the new land settlement policies in this mobile chars. Here, the government “turned the geography of the estuary to its own advantage, using the process of erosion and deposition to increase its land revenue” (p 19). This meant that the weavers, salt workers, boatmen, herds-men, labourers, and cultivators were pushed to the brink and were doubly exposed to disaster, both by being displaced to the unstable landscape threatened by the seas and under the weight of higher taxes, leaving them with fewer ways of avoiding risks when disasters visited them.

This was compounded by the fact that imperial policies mostly viewed the mangrove forest of the Sundarbans

through the twin lenses of “improvement” (which meant forest clearance) and conversion to revenue-producing lands, in a process which ignored all limits set by nature. What followed in the wake of these clearances were coercive revenue regimes and illegal taxes like *abwabs* in attempts to maximise profits from these small plots of lands cleared in between thickets of forest. The imperial judicial system, much like the railways and telegraph, mostly bypassed this region.

Unevenly Distributed Risks/Relief

What these policies ushered into the forest was nothing less than an “expandable and flexible system of land tenure ... where the land had already been subdivided by the rivers and creeks (creating) economic pressure on those at the bottom of the tenure chain” (p 43). Thus, when the cyclone struck during the month of October in 1876, it was those at the bottom who suffered the most. Overturning the dominant understanding of the randomness of natural events, Kingsbury notes that the victims of the storm were not chosen randomly. If the projects of reclamation distributed risk and profit unevenly, creating divisions based on class, occupation, and gender, then these became the divisions that “separated the living from the dead” after the cyclone (p 77).

For those who did manage to hold onto life during the cyclone, survival did not necessarily signal an end to the ordeal, since the distribution of relief was highly skewed under imperial policies. Crises often clear the way for socially oppressive policies and, as Kingsbury shows us, this was overtly the case in the Bengal countryside under an extractive imperial regime. The government’s policies, born out of Richard Temple’s fascination with market liberalism, left the victims without adequate food, water or shelter. The absence of railway infrastructure, remoteness, and general imperial indifference meant relief work was slow and haphazard. The fields swelled with decomposing bodies, resulting in the outbreak of a terrifying cholera epidemic. A tepid response from the medical institutions was only symptomatic of a “deeper ambivalence about the state’s

responsibility for public health” (p 115), creating a fatal link between “official indifference and the worst cholera epidemic Bengal had ever seen” (p 131).

In a telling final chapter, Kingsbury follows the changes this decimated landscape witnessed to show how the post-disaster policies only strengthened those who were powerful against those who were not. Unpacking the link between disaster and security discourse (a discourse that is increasingly gaining ground in the contemporary moment), Kingsbury documents how new police outposts were established in Bakarganj to aid and abet rent-extraction from these impoverished cultivators.

Even the few government loans provided went solely to the landlords and zamindars, as they were the only people who could offer security against which those loans were provided. The cultivators were not only denied loans, but they were now made to contend with richer landlords, who were sometimes also their moneylenders, and who could now raise rents under the protection of imperial police. In all of this, Richard Temple was recognised for his efforts at reducing the costs of disaster relief, and was entrusted with the higher office of the famine and was delegated to Madras in 1877. Indeed, the official response to disaster was marked by an “absence of any measures aimed at preventing a similar event in the future” (p 164). It was a disaster of imperial proportions.

Kingsbury opened the book by reminding us that this Bengal cyclone is a “forgotten disaster” not for the lack of records, but because “poor people living in remote places are easy to forget” (p xiv). Changing the analytic lens, Kingsbury painstakingly recounts in lucid prose why it was the poverty engendered through decades of imperial greed, and not the cyclone that was the larger disaster. The cyclone, followed by

Economic&PoliticalWEEKLY

available at

Gyan Deep

Near Firayalal Chowk,
Ranchi 834 001, Jharkhand
Ph: 2205640 (0651)

cholera killed them precisely because their poverty pushed them to labour in these dangerous alluvial flats, but also because these remote colonial outposts were neither served by telegraph nor train. Relief came slowly and was distributed unevenly. It did not help that imperial medical policies almost ignored the ones that suffered the worst.

Written with an eye to wider readership, Kingsbury's book holds lessons from the past for a climate-changed world. Economic inequality, greed, and market liberalism created the victims much before the cyclone and cholera claimed them. My minor squabble with this excellent book is to wonder whether it is possible to write disaster histories of the global South outside of a neo-Malthusian language? Kingsbury begins by documenting the importance of revisiting the cyclone of 1876, because the causes of the cyclone have far outlived the British rule. Among these causes, he

mentions overpopulation; a term which one may argue should not have outlived the mid-20th century neo-imperial developmental discourse of the West (p xv).

What does it mean for a particular population to be "over"? Over what? Can we genuinely rethink the lens through which we view disasters, as Kingsbury's meticulously researched and convincingly argued book asks its readers to do, if we continue to think of human lives in the global South in terms of population thresholds? In spite of this minor misgiving, this thoroughly engaging book should be required reading for historians of South Asia, environmental historians and scholars of disaster studies. Written with an acute sensitivity and historically rich, it is a story of the present as much as a story of the past.

Debjani Bhattacharyya (db893@drexel.edu) is associated with the Department of History, Drexel University, Pennsylvania, United States.

REFERENCES

- Amrith, Sunil S (2018): *Unruly Waters: How Rains, Rivers, Coasts, and Seas Have Shaped Asia's History*, New York: Basic Books.
- Frickel, Scott and M Bess Vincent (2007): "Hurricane Katrina, Contamination and the Unintended Organization of Ignorance," *Technology in Society*, Vol 29, No 2, pp 181–88.
- Graham-Sumner, William (1913): *Earth-Hunger and Other Essays*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hewitt, Kenneth (1983): "The Idea of Calamity in a Technocratic Age," *Interpretations of Calamity: From the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*, By Hewitt, New York: Allen and Unwin.
- Jayaraman, Nityanand (2019): "We Parched the Country to Quench the City, and Chennai Still Cries for Help," *Wire*, 27 June, <https://thewire.in/environment/we-parched-the-country-to-quench-the-city-and-chennai-still-cries-for-help>.
- Knowles, Scott (2014): "Engineering Risk and Disaster: Disaster-STS and the American History of Technology," *Engineering Studies*, Vol 6, No 3, pp 227–48.
- Mathur, Anuradha and Dilip da Cunha (2009): *Soak: Mumbai in an Estuary*, New Delhi: Rupa.
- Mukhopadhyay, Amites (2016): *Living with Disasters: Communities and Development in the Indian Sundarbans*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
- Nixon, Rob (2011): *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.