

Oxford India Short Introductions “*Natural Disasters and Indian History*” By Tirthankar Roy, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, ISBN: 0-19-807537-5, 2012, pp. 165 , □ 225, Paperback.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Environment is a deep rooted, influential and ingrained part of the present day historical studies. Indian history is incomplete without the history of environment. Natural disasters are also the part of environment which are very common and frequent in modern India. Throughout the history, India witnessed different types of natural disasters. These disasters had a great impact on the society, economy and polity. So, the study of history of natural disasters is very important. History is a significant discipline which can direct us to make our plans, policies, responses etc. for the future based on the mistakes of past. But there is a gap in the study of responses to the natural disasters in the Indian subcontinent from the social and economic point of view. In Indian context social and economic responses to the natural disasters have been neglected by the historians. In this background Tirthankar Roy, professor of the London School of Economics and Political Science has written a pioneering work titled ‘*Natural Disasters and Indian History*’ as an Oxford Indian Short Introduction series. This book mainly deals with the development of colonial responses to the natural disasters (1770-1935) from the social and economic point of view. This study is based on three types of natural disasters, i.e. famines, earthquakes and storms (cyclone) in Indian subcontinent and from the Bengal famine of 1770 to the Quetta earthquake of 1935. The work is divided into five chapters viz. The problem, Famines, Storms, Earthquakes and Conclusion. Each chapter is divided into sub-themes. The arguments in this book are mainly in the form of case studies of famines, earthquakes and storms.

In the first chapter the author has pointed out the major research problem on natural disasters in India. The book unveils a new area under study. According to the author, responses to the natural disasters in colonial India have been neglected by the historians. Responses to the natural disasters can be studied negatively as failure of the colonial governance. But the author has represented it positively as learning to deal with climatic risks on a historic scale. He has opined that the failure of colonial disaster responses lead to growth of new knowledge on nature. He does not recognise it as a failure because with the time and experience they knew how to relieve distress and encounter with the catastrophe. According to the author historians have neglected the effects of disasters upon societies. Famine historians have mainly focused on the issues such as imperialism and poverty instead on political and social issues. Here environmental historians have made quite change in their oversight but their main concerns lie elsewhere than in social and economic history. The author has adopted three time scales viz. the short, the medium and the long run respectively roughly corresponding to the market, politics and knowledge to understand colonial response to the natural disasters. The major time scales are interrelated to three parts, i.e. chaotic phase (the short), rebuilding phase (the medium) and accumulation of knowledge (the long run). First phase or chaotic situation can be defined as breakdown of state control. It stays roughly around weeks or months. During the time when natural disasters abruptly take place, with the limited resources and infrastructure, colonial governance was unable to avert the catastrophic situation. This helplessness situation would create chaotic phase. The second phase or rebuilding phase is concerned with the politics and cooperation. It spans for years. This phase is also mixed with helplessness in disaster response due to economic, infrastructural, co-operational and information gaps or shortcomings. The third phase is accumulation of knowledge on nature regarding prevention for a long period of time which is a decadal process. The author has shown that disasters impaired the state and civil society. It created gainers and losers by destroying societal cooperation. Natural disasters developed new understanding of the nature, state and society. Though the author is not a supporter of colonialism but he has propounded an anti-thesis to the prevalent

criticism of the British failure in the matter of natural disaster response and the conventional anti-Imperial environmental and famine history.

The second chapter mainly deals with the case studies on famines to put forward arguments for his hypothesis. Here he has criticized the anti-Imperial famine related writings of Ramesh Chunder Dutta (*Indian Famines : Their Causes and Prevention*, 1901) and (*India in the Victorian Age*, 1904), Dadabhai Naoroji (*Poverty and Unbritish Rule in India* ,1901), Mike Davis (*Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, 2001), B.M. Bhatia (*Famines in India: a Study in Some Aspects of the Economic History of India,1860 to 1945* , 1963), Amartya Sen (Entitlement Approach) etc. These thinkers have represented famine as a man-made event or failure of the colonial state. Here the author has represented that famine response of the colonial governance did not depend only on the will of the state to help people, but on the capacity of the state. According to the author famines in India took place due to the economic crisis of the colonial government. Famines occurred because the poverty of the peasants made the government too helpless to deal with the effects of crop failure. British India was one of the poorest state in the world. British India had a very limited fiscal resources. Average tax per person in the early 19th century in India was less than one-tenth of that in England, half of that in Ireland, a quarter of that in Australia, about a third of the West Indian colonies and a quarter of that in Mauritius. He has come to conclusion that economically colonial governance was weaker than the other colonial countries. This economic weakness made it unable to invest much on the infrastructural development. Its infrastructural and information gathering mechanism was insufficient in the beginning. With the limited resources and infrastructure their presence was limited to certain major cities and ports where famine relief measures were taken. These inadequacy made them helpless in the second phase of response that is rebuilding. He opines unregulated, anarchic market was responsible for the helplessness in natural disasters instead of laissez faire policy. The author has pointed out that during the famines of 1770, 1783, 1837, 1866 and the famines of Deccan plateau (1875-1900) colonial response was not sufficient. The failure of the famine relief camps in the end of 19th century for being their location in major towns and feeding anyone who could work. For this reason support goes to the healthy people. Co-operational shortcomings with the local communities and rulers were also responsible for insufficient response. But later on colonial governance took major initiatives for the mitigation of famines. They introduced a system of self criticism, in-depth reporting, scientific discourse on famine to draw out what had gone wrong to save lives. Through this process they gained and gathered knowledge about the rainfall and crop patterns, need of construction of more railways, strengthening private trade, strengthening private charity, need for irrigation, agricultural statistics, timely intelligence, public works, speed of response etc. For the information collection about markets and food prices, railways and widespread medias were developed. Railways played a major role in famine response. Many canals were developed for water supply. For famine, early warning system and famine codes were introduced after the Deccan famines.

The third chapter deals with storms. Cyclonic storms were responsible for inundation in Bengal seaboard and delta. Same as the famines, in the case of storms and tsunami, we can see again a retreat of the state law and public relief in short run, the emergence of markets and private relief and competition for resources. The collaboration between the state and society in the early 19th century lead to the failure of effective disaster response of the colonial governance. Their interests diverged too much. Such as during the 1830s and the 1850s the government of Bengal's plan to make flood embankment had failed due to non cooperation of the local *Zamindars*. The long run response led to growth of a new knowledge about the catastrophe. Weather prediction and embankment construction were major preventive measures adopted by the colonial regime. The public works department was started in 1856. The department took major responsibility for the protection of lives and lands from floods by constructing embankment. After the disastrous cyclone of 1864 in Calcutta a meteorological office was founded. The Indian Meteorological Department was also formed for the cyclone in 1875.

The fourth chapter deals with earthquakes. In this chapter the author has cited earthquakes of Kachchh (1819), Assam (1897), Bihar (1934), Quetta (1935). During both the earthquakes of 1930s response of the British became problematic due to cooperation and political struggles of the day. But positive attitude of colonial regime led to grow scientific knowledge on the earthquakes. For earthquake management, predictive science gained momentum. The Indian Geological Survey was formed after the earthquake in Kachchh (1819). After the earthquake of Assam (1897), the region saw a new pattern of earthquake-resistant housing style. The earthquakes of 1930s led to improvement in seismic zone mapping.

The fifth chapter put forward the importance of positive legacies of foreign rule in India regarding natural disaster response. Here the author has mentioned that during the time of disasters like, earthquake of Latur and Osmanabad (1993), Storm of Orissa (1999), Kachchh earthquake (2001) etc. response of independent India was not satisfactory due to social costs, collective action and poor maintenance. This chapter also

criticizes colonial profit and power mode of study of environmental history in India and emphasizes on the knowledge enterprise as the base of theoretical understanding of natural disasters.

The book is detailed, elaborate and vivid in the making of a new aspect of analysis on environmental history. Selection of words and sentences are simple. Its arguments are enough to make the base for the study of response to natural disasters. This book unveils the first systematic study of the natural disasters from the social and economic point of view instead of political criticism which is totally contrary to the widely prevalent approach on the colonial governance in the disaster response. This book has been written using bibliographic notes at the end of the book which highlights major publications in this particular field. Footnotes or numbered references are not given in this work. Sequential arrangement of major events in the form of case studies, elaborative maps and pictorial depiction and figures on different objects have made this work a lucrative one. But it has some shortcomings like narrow selection of case studies on natural disasters, study of only few selected natural disasters, limited period under study, studied mainly the eastern India. Different components like the complex issues of economics, prevention, collaboration, insurance, location etc. have been neglected in this work. This book may be recommended to anyone who is interested in the study of colonial or postcolonial social and economic study, disaster management and environmental history of India. This book will be a very influential in the study of natural disasters response in the future.

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