

Theorizing Disaster: A Historian's Perspective

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Disaster is a multi-dimensional social phenomenon, the study of which has generated important international debates across disciplines. Scholars, however, have yet to reach a common consensus on the definition of disaster. Most debates on human-environment relations and issues of development hinge around disaster studies. This *Opinion* piece is an attempt to theorize disaster, the historian's way. Understanding disasters, theorizing and debating them has actively engaged scholars across disciplines: anthropology, cultural geography, environment, sociology, political science, history and psychology. Though disaster studies are highly interdisciplinary and an important site for international debates, research literature on it has remained fragmented along disciplinary lines with each field focusing on its own domain of interest.

Scholars have found it problematic to reach a common understanding or a consensus on the definition of disaster. Sociologists define disaster as organizational behaviour; geographers identify it with the 'hazardness' of a place; and political scientists speak of risk assessment policies and practices. Anthropology with its holistic perspective is perhaps uniquely suited to tackle the theoretical challenges that disasters present. In analyzing disaster and catastrophe, anthropologists have studied the construction of cultural meanings and world views (Bhargava, 2017; Oliver-Smith, 2002). Talking of disaster mitigation, psychologists have addressed the sense of loss and displacement caused by disasters. Faced with change, loss and destruction, the disaster-stricken have raised existential questions which reflect the moral and ethical values of belief systems and include concepts of social and cosmic justice, sin and retribution, causality, the relationship of the secular to the sacred and the existence and nature of the divine. In many ancient civilizations, both in the East and the West, natural disasters were earlier interpreted as a sign of divine punishment. It was

believed that earthquakes, fires, landslides, floods and pestilence were an indication of divine rage against the sinful lives of the people, the incompetence of the sovereign and the general moral decline in society. A disaster was considered a challenge from God to test the human capacity to manage it through truthfulness and righteousness (Rohr, 2003). The Rigveda and Atharvaveda, the two ancient Indian scriptures, recommended expiation by performance of religious rites such as worshipping of the Gods, chanting of sacred mantras and animal sacrifices. For instance, if there was no rainfall, *Indra*, the God of Rain had to be invoked and in case the river changed its course or inundated its bank, worship of that particular river had to be performed (Agrawal, 2000).

Disasters have become a metaphor for many processes and events in the contemporary world cutting across every aspect of human life, impacting environmental, social, economic, political and biological conditions. Affecting aspects of community life disasters are both physical and social processes, in which a geophysical or biological event is evidently implicated in some form or the other in causing disaster (Blaikie et al, 2004). Disasters are primarily a social phenomenon. They are natural calamities often considered to be extreme material events that can be caused by demographic changes, rapid urbanization, environmental degradation or climatic changes. The region of South Asia and India, in particular, is considered to be one of the most disaster-prone regions with about 85 per cent of the country prone to some kind of disaster – floods, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes, landslides – able to cause destruction and bring havoc to the physical environment and the resources of its society. A recent report on natural calamity suggested that about 60 per cent of the Indian landmass was liable to earthquake of varied intensities; one-eighth (40 million ha) of its entire geographical area was unresisting to floods with one-fifth of the flood-prone area subjected to floods annually; approximately 8 per cent of the total area was prone to cyclones; and 68 per cent of the total area

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was susceptible to severe drought (Singh, 1996; Gupta, 2003).

Notwithstanding the corrosive power of rivers and the social implications of this process, the water courses since antiquity had determined human settlements and human activity. The impact of water systems on environment and human-environment relations is significantly evident by the abundance of archaeological sites along river margins and the banks of streams and lakes (Thapar, 2015). Transformations in landscapes occur whether owing to geology, geomorphology or human activity. The relation of river action to geographic forms and on some occasions to feuds over land property rights can be exemplified by the recurrently changing course of river Gandak (tributary of River Ganga) in the eighteenth century in Gorakhpur region of Uttar Pradesh (India) that created *gangshikisht* and *gangberamud* lands i.e. lands carried away or thrown away by the changing course of the rivers resulting in persistent discord over these lands. More importantly, the turbulent hydrograph of River Ganga and its tributaries caused natural disasters in the form of floods, tides and inundated banks though erosion (silting up of one bank while the other is being eroded) and avulsion (the cutting of a new channel) remained its major characteristic and method of altering its course (Bhargava, 2017).

Most debates on human-environment relations and issues of development and sustainability hinge around disaster studies. Entrenched intensely in environmental and human systems, disasters are an indicator of a society's failure to adaptation and sustainability (Oliver-Smith, 1996). Interpreting disasters, a few scholars have rejected the often-held theory that disaster means the collapse of the productive potential of a social order. Shifting the focus from the disaster event, they have emphasized on societal and man-environment relations and have defined natural disasters as the normal order of things rather than as an accidental geophysical feature (Hewitt, 1983).

From a historian's point of view, the study of disasters is a relatively young field of research initiated in response to contemporary awakening to the implications of such calamities across the globe. Historians had earlier neglected natural catastrophes and disasters as historical events, dismissing them as mere 'accidental facts'. They had argued that man was the sole 'actor' of history. So, if disasters had not been studied earlier in detail or in depth, one of the reasons lay in disaster being considered to be an event and not a process (Kempe and Rohr, 2003; Oliver-Smith, 2002). Concerns of the present have stimulated discussions amongst historians and social scientists in two directions: they have triggered off an

engagement with the history of disasters during the past centuries and also drawn attention to the discursive framework within which the discussion of disasters take place, both in the present and the past. It has been argued by anthropologists like Escobar (2011) that such regions of the globe that were once considered 'salubrious' and separated from areas more prone to disease and mortality are now construed as 'unsafe' because of their susceptibility and vulnerability to disaster. Roughly three or four decades subsequent to World War II, social scientists regarded disasters as unpredictable and unavoidable extreme events, a divergence from the normal that entailed a technocratic response. But a new perspective has now emerged since the early 1980s that views hazards, argues Oliver-Smith (1996), as basic elements of environments and as constructed features of human systems though older views surprisingly have been rather enduring.

The new approach to disaster studies may be characterized by at least two requisites that have generated a basic consensus. First, the proposition that disasters are not natural but social phenomena even if triggered by extreme natural factors. Extreme factors or events may happen at any place, any time but they turn into a disaster if societies are affected and there is material damage, harm or loss of lives. The second new perspective in disaster studies is the belief that within the societies affected by disaster there are a number of factors that explain complex economic, political and social configurations that place certain societies or groups within a society at higher risks than others. These conditions are now clustered around the term 'social vulnerability'. Social vulnerability has emerged as a vital concept to explain the social character of disasters (Juneja and Mauelshagen, 2007). Social vulnerability refers to the socioeconomic and demographic factors that affect the resilience of communities. Studies have shown that in disaster events the socially vulnerable are more likely to be adversely affected, i.e. they are less likely to recover and more likely to die. Effectively addressing social vulnerability decreases both human suffering and the economic loss related to providing social services and public assistance after a disaster.

It is pertinent to suggest that historical sciences are on the threshold of a geographical turn; the results, methods and concepts developed by geographers and social scientists are usefully applied within historical disaster studies. Historians have researched to reconstruct extreme events like earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, extreme weather, climate change and others. Important investigations in historical perspective also include the strategies to cope

with disaster, its mitigation and prevention in the past and their meaning for the present. Experience, knowledge, cultural and institutional practice including organizational systems of disaster management and prevention, civil defense or even the insurance systems are based on the expectation of repetition derived from the experience of repeated disasters. Disasters can no longer be considered as single exceptional cases. Recent analyses of disasters explain why they should not be separated from everyday life and indicate how the risks involved in disasters should be connected with the vulnerability created for many people through their normal existence. These analyses are focused to understand the links between the risks that people face and the reasons for their vulnerability to hazards (Juneja and Mauelshagen, 2007).

Any meaningful discussion of what makes societies and populations particularly vulnerable to disasters (poverty is a major contributor to vulnerability. Poor people are more likely to live and work in areas exposed to potential hazards, while they are less likely to have the resources to cope when a disaster strikes. In richer regions, people usually have a greater capacity to resist the impact of a hazard) and of the role of local agency in devising measures of relief that may not necessarily conform to those envisaged by technocrats calls for an understanding of both disaster vulnerability and coping strategies.

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