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## Afterword

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The central theme in this book is well stated in the paper by Lola Sharon Davidson:

... a disaster may start as a natural event, but in becoming a disaster it becomes a social experience, that is an experience defined and interpreted according to social beliefs. Not even natural disasters can remain purely 'natural'. At first glance some events appear unequivocally disastrous. Earthquakes and plagues seem to afflict indiscriminately everyone who has the misfortune to be in their vicinity. Yet some people are more vulnerable to their assaults than others – the poor more than the rich, or urban dwellers more than those who live in the country. And while few people would dispute that such events are disastrous, people nevertheless differ on what such disasters may mean.

In 1974 on one December day, Darwin was struck by Cyclone Tracey. What followed confirms Davidson's points about disasters. The nation was shaken by the pitiful pictures of a city destroyed, thousands made homeless and many dead. This happened during the Christmas celebrations. Suddenly there was a strong feeling right across the nation; it was as if everyone in Australia was involved with the disaster. The television recorded moving scenes at Sydney Airport; people rushed to help the evacuees from Darwin with blankets, food parcels and offers of shelters. Then relief funds and relief work were organised to help the victims and to rebuild the city. Heroes were born. There was a social and economic analysis of the disaster and the victims. And then politics raised its ugly head, acrimony followed, heroes became villains. Cyclone Tracey could no longer be considered a pure 'natural' disaster. It was a social and political experience. It occurred to

me that the Darwin disaster could be considered as Australian History in miniature, for it reflected all areas of Australian life, society, culture, economics and politics. I thought that a study of this and other disasters could make us understand societies and culture better, not only with how these societies and cultures react to emergencies, but crises like natural disasters often bring to the surface some deep rooted problems and cultural preoccupations which otherwise remain unnoticed.

My original idea of organizing an inter-disciplinary and inter-regional conference on disasters did not materialize until 1990. In 1988 I heard Peter Hinton give a paper entitled *Fears of a Nuclear End: Deterrent or Latterday Eschatology?* (see Hinton 1989) at one of the Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture's (SASSC) regular seminars. I was impressed by what Peter Hinton had to say and we discussed the possibility of holding a conference on disasters. Accordingly, in 1990, we organized a one-day workshop in Sydney. This workshop was jointly sponsored by SASSC and the Centre for Disaster Studies, Cumberland College of Health Sciences. This was a successful day. There were papers on Japan, Indonesia, medieval Europe, modern Australia, on disasters and gender, on disaster management, etc, followed by a good debate. We then decided to hold an international conference on the subject. This was eventually organised in conjunction with the Institution of Engineers as described by Peter Hinton in his Introduction.

The articles published in this volume are a selection of papers which were presented at this seminar. They are organized geographically and chronologically. We start with Australia, move on to Japan and then to medieval and modern Europe. Peter Hinton introduces these nine papers in his Introduction. I shall only highlight the points relevant for this note.

We start with Stuart Pigggin's paper. In it Pigggin makes a case for 'history as the discipline of context'. The 'context' here is related to the Mt Kembla mining disaster. The paper evaluates the memory of the disaster in 'the light of the phase in which it was produced' in the altruistic emergency and recovery phases, the bitter investigation phase, the mellow club phase, the urgent survivor remnant celebrity phase, or the reflective post-survivors' phase'.

Susan Baggett examines the metaphors of unity and division in fire and flood ('Bushfires bring people together; floods divide them'). She argues that the metaphors applied to fire and flood 'have more to do with the identification of these as quintessentially Australian rather than prompted from some kind of essence of the phenomena themselves'. Baggett agrees that class divisions remain 'one of the primary factors of disunity in Australia', but she argues that class is not the motivator of dispute in flood

crises, rather it is the lack of a notion of cooperation on a broad scale 'other than that contained within mateship' that is the cause of disunity.

Anderson and Cotton are concerned with the psychological impact of the Newcastle earthquake during the first twelve months after its occurrence. Their paper is about the victims from the point of the social welfare workers and counsellors.

Robert Ariss examines the AIDS epidemic as a disaster. He approaches allopathic medicine or bio-medicine as a hegemonic 'technology of the body' in the Foucauldian sense. The victims of the disease themselves 'continue to hold a faith in science far beyond what many of its own practitioners support'. Ariss warns us against such faith and the superiority of science; this 'can only lead ultimately to impoverishment of both our ability to pursue the good life, and experience dignity at death'.

Matthew Allen's paper is about Japan. In it, Allen shows how a study of the Yamano coal mine disaster of 1965 brought to the surface the underlying tensions in the Japanese industrial relations system. The union system in Japan, known as enterprise unionism, is considered as ideal system for reducing the number of days lost to industrial disputes, for improving business efficiency and for enhancing overall economic performance. But a study of the Yamano coal mine disaster shows that the economic performance was achieved at a great human cost. The enterprise union system is an acceptable structure when things are running smoothly, when the interests of workers and management are aligned, but when events, like the coal mine disaster, move beyond the control of the company and the union, the feelings of the victims and their families emerge in a cathartic display of animosity directed at both the company and the union. 'Rather than being perceived as a representative body for the workers, the union came to be seen as "the dogs of the company"'.

With John O. Ward's most erudite paper we move into the world of Europe in the Middle Ages, with Crusades and popular millenarian movements. Ward shows the connections between the two and how the Crusades were as big a disaster to medieval Europe as the Black Death is known to be.

Sharon Davidson examines the medieval responses to disasters, 'at least at the textual level accessible to us'. It seems to the people of the Middle Ages that 'any disaster, as indeed any event, no matter how great or how small, had a moral significance and a place in the divine plan.'

James Hatty focuses his attention on Florence during the Plague. Hatty is less interested in the demographic, economic and political effects of the epidemic than in the reaction of individuals and groups to the Plague. The community fought the disease on the basis of their own understanding of the

situation. For instance, the Florentines asked for God's forgiveness and turned away from sinful living. Some took flight at any opportunity. Finally they sought to lay blame for the infection on minority groups which were outside the main structure of society - Jews, Muslims, lepers, prostitutes, homosexuals, etc.

David Brook's paper takes us to London in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He uses Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* published in 1722, but purported to be written by a bourgeois merchant who stayed in London during the Great Plague of 1664. The *Journal* highlights the responses 'to the Plague itself which involve science, practical policy, religion, and also responses of human beings to each other under the stress of living through the Plague'. Brooks concludes that the *Journal* is, at times, undoubtedly impressive as the record of a human response to suffering and the need for mutuality. But, he feels that the document betrays the class attitudes and the 'inevitable concomitants of evasiveness and bad faith'.

It seems to me that our conference in March 1991, on *Contextualizing Disasters* was not so much about the historical, social and political backgrounds (as the word context would imply) as it was about cultural responses to disasters - in medieval Europe, fourteenth century Florence, seventeenth century England, twentieth century Australia, and so on. It is a legitimate subject with both theoretical and practical implications. Here I give a case study of such responses. My area is Bihar in India and the year is 1934.

*The Indian Annual Register (IAR)* of 1934 recorded what might be considered the semi-official and formal version of 'The Disaster' in 1934, p.18.

15 January - A disastrous earthquake occurred in North India to-day and the shock was felt in the whole area from Assam to Cawnpore. Bihar was the province most affected. The earthquake caused wide-spread loss of life and damage to buildings, the full extent of which could not be ascertained owing to interruption of telegraphic and railway communication. In Patna division, a government communiqué said, over 500 lives were lost and several hundreds of persons injured and over 4,000 houses in the town were either damaged or destroyed. In Bhagalpur division, there was not much loss of life estimated at several thousands occurred in the bazar which was a heap of ruins. At Jamalpur great damage was done, while about 20 died. Tirhut division suffered most, with railways and roads unpassable. Many lives were lost in Muzaffarpur Town and buildings damaged. Darbhanga was equally affected. Both palaces of the Maharaja of Darbhanga were damaged. In Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga almost every European factory was damaged.

By 28 January it was estimated that in Monghyr and Muzaffarpur alone, 'deaths of human beings would exceed twelve thousand' houses and markets destroyed, over 100,000 cattle destroyed, and 'towns were stinking on account of the dead bodies under the debris which were not extricated' (*IAR* Vol.1:19). In fact we now know that in Bihar alone over twenty thousand

people died, many more injured, properties reduced to rubble, neighbourhoods disappeared.

The news of the earthquake, or at least the scale of it, was not known to the wider public outside the disaster area for some time. On 15 January Nehru felt the tremor in Allahabad while standing on the veranda of the family home addressing a group of peasants. He did not know then, nor could he guess, 'what those two or three minutes had meant to millions in Behar [Bihar] and elsewhere' (Nehru 1988:481). That night he travelled with his wife to Calcutta. During the night the train took them through the earthquake area, totally unaware of the calamity. It was not until 18 January that Nehru knew about the Bihar disaster. For some time parts of Bihar were completely cut off from the rest of India; roads, railways and telegraph lines were out of action; 'over approximately nine hundred miles there was hardly a mile of track of the Bengal and The North Western Railway which was not seriously affected' (*LAR* 1934:218).

The governments in Patna (capital of Bihar) and New Delhi were slow to react to the disaster. As the news of the earthquake reached Patna on the morning of 16 January, the government despatched a team of eleven doctors and medical students to Monghyer and the next day another such team to Muzaffarpur and Tirhut. The Bihar government acquired two aeroplanes from Calcutta for gathering news and making reconnaissances in the affected area.

The Viceroy of India set up a fund for earthquake relief and he himself donated Rs5,000 towards it. The King-Emperor and the Queen donated £150 (Rs1,900). By the end of February the government had collected about Rs500,000. The Bihar government had also started another relief fund. They could not, however, raise quite as much money. The Viceroy in New Delhi and the Governor in Patna were more interested in sending medical aid, with doctors, medical students, nurses, medicines and blankets, than clearing debris and saving lives. The armed forces were deployed to help to clear debris and provide tents and blankets for displaced persons. But they came rather late to be useful to save life. It would seem that the government policy was more concerned with protecting and restoring properties and factories than providing relief for the victims. Moreover, as India was governed under the 1919 Act which upheld a federal system, the central government was unwilling to intervene which they considered a question 'primarily' for the local government (*LAR* 1934, p.89).

It was proposed that a fund to the tune of three crores (30 million) to be raised so that it could be given out as interest-free loans or at low interest rates to individuals and groups to reconstruct Bihar. The government of India was willing to give one crore to the Bihar government, half of it as a

loan and half as a gift. Accordingly, Sir Alan Parsons, Financial Secretary to the government of India, visited Patna to discuss the financial problems of the disaster (*LAR* 1934, p.89).

It was, however, estimated that 50 crores (500 million) was needed for the reconstruction of Bihar. The government made no provision to raise such large funds. The government plans did not include emergency measures for relief, nor the restoration of municipal services. No government dignitary visited the devastated area.

The nationalists were quick to react and criticize the government. On 12 February Nehru issued a statement to the press: 'No-one blames the government for the earthquake. But if the government fails to act at the right moment, it is inefficient, and if this failure results in serious loss to the community, it must be held responsible for this loss' (Nehru 1974:197).

Nehru blamed the government for not acting swiftly, and not trying to save life and lessen human suffering. He thought that a state of emergency should have been declared and the Army and the Railway workers should have been employed to clear the debris, immediately after the news of the calamity had reached Patna: 'A fact, which has a terrible significance, is the recovery of living persons from under the debris, day after day, right up to the thirteenth day after the earthquake many bodies were also recovered which doctors testified to having died a day or two earlier. How many died during that fateful period when they might have been rescued alive if real efforts in that direction had been made?' (Nehru 1974:198).

The British officials, however, were preoccupied with something which they considered far more serious and disastrous than the Bihar earthquake. This was the rising tide of 'terrorism' in Bengal. If records were to be believed then the government spent more time and energy in suppressing 'terrorism' than in any other public affairs.

On 8 January 1934 at the Calcutta European Association Annual Dinner, the Viceroy referred to the Bengal 'terrorists' as 'the greatest enemies of their own country' and he promised his audience that the full resources and power of the government would continue to be employed against 'terrorism' (*LAR* 1934:17). Accordingly, the government took draconian measures to combat extremism; they forced an amendment of the Bengal Criminal Act through the Legislative Council placing some extraordinary powers in the hands of the district magistrates and the police to harass terrorist suspects. A reign of terror ensued in Bengal, more particularly in Chittagong and in Midnapore.

In Chittagong all suspected youths were rounded up and all young men were forced to stay at home for a week. In Midnapore villagers were harassed for not saluting the Union Jack; men were flogged in public and

their properties destroyed. Many books and magazines were proscribed and many 'suspected terrorists' were detained without trial throughout Bengal. The 'Terrorism' continued unabated, bombs were thrown at European cricket matches, and in May 1934 there was an attempt to assassinate the Governor of Bengal and thousands joined the Terrorist cause. The government, however, continued with its ruthless policy of suppression. Nehru called this a 'political earthquake', when a government loses all self control, 'has no clear purpose in view except that of destruction and the desire to revenge itself on its adversaries' (Nehru 1974:152).

It seems that the official response to the Bihar disaster was cautious and constrained by financial necessity and constitutional law. The government showed more interest in giving medical aid and loans to rebuild houses and properties than saving lives and providing immediate relief. Moreover, the British were preoccupied elsewhere in Bengal, fighting 'Terrorism'; to them this was a greater disaster than the Bihar earthquake.

Nehru and the nationalists reacted swiftly, as soon as the news reached them. Sir Prafulla Chandra Ray, the well known scientist and philanthropist, appealed for help:

North Bihar is literally a whole mess of ruin. Lakhs (hundreds of thousands) have lost their dwelling houses and are now exposed to weather and wind. Wells have either gone dry or have been choked with sand thrown up from fissures made in the surface of the earth. Thousands of acres of what were most fertile land before the quake are sandy deserts today . . .

Remember we are on our trial shall, we shall have to live on one meal and part with the other for their sake I pressingly urge my brothers and sisters to realise this and contribute to the best of their capacity (*IAR* 1934:21).

While most Indians did not give up their meals to save them for their 'brothers and sisters' in Bihar, thousands, however, helped with money, blankets, food, shelter and voluntary labour. Dr Rajendra Prasad, the future first president of the independent Republic of India, started a Central Relief Fund as soon as he got out of prison (Gandhi 1974:44). The Congress used its national and international networks to raise funds, recruit volunteers and publicize the plight of the victims and their relief works. Most leaders were in and out of prison, but they still managed to obtain more volunteers than they could handle (Nehru 1974:191) and received well deserved publicity. Nehru visited North Bihar twice and helped to raise funds in Allahabad before he went back to prison in February. He left some moving photographs and a vivid description of Muzaffarpur and the victims there:

Muzaffarpur was in ruins. Thousands of houses had collapsed and many that remained standing were cracked and dangerous to approach.

The streets were full of bricks and debris. Many of the smaller lanes were wholly blocked by the fallen material and one had to mount up ten feet or more to cross it . . . The debris still covered corpses. I saw corpses being carried away for disposal. I saw also a corpse emerge as the debris was being removed to clear a lane. It was that of a young man. His arm was up, apparently to protect himself from a falling wall . . . There was no escape for those who lived in the crowded quarters of the city, with its narrow lanes, no escape especially for the women folk (Nehru 1974:186-187).

No doubt the nationalists, more particularly the Congress Party, was moved by the plight of the victims in Bihar and willing and able to help. But as we have already noticed, Nehru and his friends were quick to use the disaster and the government relief efforts as a weapon to criticise the official policy. Moreover, the Congress was eager to show that they could provide an efficient and humane alternative to the British rule in India and hence used the disaster (Nehru 1988:484-489).

In 1934, Gandhi was busy fighting untouchability. Earlier that year he was in South India collecting funds, opening schools for Harijans (untouchables), lecturing to thousands of men and women about the evils of untouchability and discussing with community leaders about the possibilities of abolishing untouchability. He came to know about the Bihar disaster sometime on 23 January 1934. On 24 January, Gandhi mentioned the Bihar disaster at a public meeting in Tinnevelly:

You may call me superstitious if you like, but a man like me cannot but believe that this earthquake is divine chastisement sent by God for our sins . . . For me there is a vital connection between the Bihar calamity and the untouchability campaign. The Bihar calamity is a sudden and accidental reminder of what we are and what God is; but untouchability is a calamity handed down to us from century to century. It is a curse brought upon ourselves by our own neglect of a portion of Hindu humanity. Whilst this disaster in Bihar damages the body, the calamity brought about by untouchability corrodes the very soul' (Gandhi 1974:44-46).

Later that day he urged his audience in Tuticorin 'to be "superstitious" enough with me to believe that the earthquake is a divine chastisement for the great sin we have committed and are still committing against those whom we describe as untouchable, Panchamas, and whom I describe as Harijans' (Gandhi 1974:46-47).

Gandhi was criticized by some members of the public for not rushing off to Bihar: 'must Mahatma fiddle while Bihar is burning?' But Gandhi firmly believed that God had chosen him for the Harijan cause, which was a far greater calamity than the earthquake in Bihar. He did not rush to Bihar, he refused to divert his Harijan funds to the victims in Bihar, and he took every opportunity to tell his audience that the Bihar earthquake was God's punishment for the sin of untouchability. Yet he urged his people to help the victims in Bihar, collected donations for the central Relief Funds, volunteers from his Ashrams went to help in the devastated area, and he urged the

government and the Congress workers to co-operate to help Bihar, 'the birthplace of Sita'. Gandhi repeated his arguments in almost all his correspondence during the first half of the year. He urged everyone to help Bihar and fight untouchability: 'Let anti-untouchability reformers regard the earthquake as a nemesis for the sin of untouchability. They cannot go wrong, if they have the faith that I have. They will help Bihar more and not less for that faith. And they will try to create an atmosphere against reproduction of untouchability in any scheme of reconstruction' (Gandhi 1974:87).

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the poet from Bengal, was shocked by Gandhi's speeches on the Bihar earthquake. As a child of the Bengal Renaissance Tagore was unable to accept Gandhi's unscientific views on God and social evil:

It has caused me painful surprise to find Mahatma Gandhi accusing those who blindly follow their own social custom of untouchability of having brought down God's vengeance upon certain parts of Bihar, evidently selected for his desolating displeasure. It is all the more unfortunate because this kind of unscientific view of things is too readily accepted by a large section of our countrymen (Gandhi 1974:503-506).

He warned Gandhi that this kind of argument, using a natural calamity as an example of god's work against some social evil could easily be used against the Mahatma. His opponents could argue that it was Gandhi and his followers who were responsible for the visitation of 'Divine anger'. As a true son of Bengal Enlightenment he appealed to Gandhi: We who are immensely grateful to Mahatmaji for inducing, by his wonder-working inspiration, freedom from fear and feebleness in the minds of his countrymen, feel profoundly hurt when any words from his mouth emphasize the elements of unreason in those very minds – unreason which is a fundamental source of all the blind powers that drive us against freedom and self-respect' (Gandhi 1974:503-506)

Nehru joined the debate supporting Tagore against the Mahatma: 'To suggest that a human custom or failing had its reactions on the movements of the earth's crust is an astounding thing. The idea of sin and divine wrath and man's relative importance in the affairs of the universe, – they take us back a few hundred years, when [the] Inquisition flourished in Europe and burned Giordano Bruno for his scientific heresy and sent many a witch to the stake' (Nehru 1974:490).

Gandhi was unrepentant; he was no modern rational intellectual; he was a faithful servant of God: 'With me the connection between cosmic phenomena and human behaviour is a living faith that draws me nearer to my God, humbles me and makes me readier for facing Him. Such a belief

would be a degrading superstition if out of the depth of my ignorance I used it for castigating my opponents' (Nehru 1974:164-166).

In a way Gandhi was right; his irrational faith in God touched the hearts and souls of ordinary Indians, and he could do more to help the victims in Bihar and the untouchables. And the Mahatma raised more funds and more volunteers than his rationalist intellectual friends could do.

It seems that my case study illustrates the points raised by Sharon Davidson, that disasters are not just natural events, but social experiences, and people differ about the relief works and dispute the meaning of such events. In Bihar the British Government was cautious, and being preoccupied with a 'political disaster' in Bengal, they did not respond to the earthquake with the urgency that was needed to help the victims. the nationalists rallied to help, but partly because they wanted to prove the efficiency of their organization and to criticize the government. Gandhi thought that God had shown him a way to connect the Bihar calamity with untouchability. The relief workers on the ground, who came from various groups, probably helped the victims more than the government or the nationalist leaders.

The Finance Member of the Bihar government said that 'the disaster has drawn us together. our minds have been touched to first issues. Let us see to it that in the new Bihar that will rise out of its ruin this happy union will continue' (*IAR* 1934:53). This was a pious hope. No sooner the debate about the Bihar Relief work was over, the fight between the imperial power and the nationalists started again and the 'new' Bihar is yet to materialize.

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