



**Vulnerable India: A Geographical Study of Disasters.** Anu Kapur. Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, B1/I-1, Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area, Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044 and Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla 171 005. 2010. 269 pp. Price: Rs 850.

Extreme natural events have always been a part of the earth's ecosystem. Together with human habitat, they are transformed into natural disasters with appreciable loss of life and property. There is no part of India that is not vulnerable to disasters of one kind or another. It is also known that pre-disaster preparedness and post-disaster relief can considerably reduce not only the loss of human life and property, but also human trauma. Unlike many books published earlier on disasters, disaster management and disaster mitigation that take a mechanistic view of things, the present book seeks to present a comprehensive framework to understand disasters. To this end it puts together a wide range of conceptualizations of disasters, from those of traditional Indian philosophy to those based on modern science. The comprehensiveness also extends to presenting a wide range of issues, from the perceived causes of disasters to the vulnerability of populations in dealing with them.

The comprehensiveness is also reflected in the author's efforts to measure vulnerability. She does this through indicators of vulnerability designed to capture disadvantaged people, fragile living and the absence of basic services. The five indicators of disadvantaged people

are illiterate females, marginal workers, agricultural labourers, scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population, and disabled people. Fragile living has been addressed through the population living below the poverty line, infant mortality rate, those residing in kaccha houses, and those without specified assets. Four basic services were treated as critical: non-irrigated crop area, villages without metalled roads, rural-urban distance, and persons to be served per doctor. This comprehensive picture is presented in a style that is easily understandable.

The search for comprehensiveness within a 270 page volume is however not without its traps and the book falls into at least two of them: it makes serious compromises on the depth of analysis, and it fails to provide an active link between the many dimensions of disasters that it lists. The absence of depth can be seen in the somewhat uncritical use of some of these indicators. There is no discussion on why a particular poverty line is chosen at a time when the debate has thrown up a variety of such lines. There is also a tendency to sidestep important issues. This is most evident in the virtual absence of any analysis of the possibility of climate change having an impact on disasters. Even if the author believes that the predictions of greater disasters in the climate change literature are all mere fantasy, it needs to be mentioned and discussed.

The author's unwillingness to explore some of the issues adequately is also reflected in the use of the material. This is perhaps best seen in her use of Gandhi's famous quote on the Bihar earthquake of 1934 being a chastisement for the sins of untouchability. She presents the quotation in its entirety, including the part



Flood

where Gandhi insists that such 'calamities are not the caprice of deity or nature. They obey fixed laws as surely as the planets do. Only we do not know the laws governing them. Whatever therefore may be said about them must be regarded as guesswork. It is an ennobling thing for me to think that the Bihar disturbance is due to the sin of untouchability. It makes me humble. It spurs me to greater effort towards its removal. It encourages me to purify myself. It brings me nearer to my maker' (p. 108). At first glance this statement by Gandhi can be, and indeed has been, treated as a call to superstition. But as the entire quotation shows, the comment is based on the recognition that the reasons being given for the calamity were no more than guesswork and in that grey area, faith could have more noble consequences by strengthening the fight against untouchability. The author completely sidesteps this debate.

The more serious limitation is the inadequate exploration of the linkages between the many processes she mentions. While she looks at both tradition and modern perceptions of disaster, there are too few questions asked about the link between the two. Can any of the traditional methods of predicting calamities, for instance, be adapted to modern technology? Even within the realm of scientific argument there is inadequate discussion of the actions of mankind that could make an area disaster-prone, or at least reduce the ability of a region to absorb a disaster. For instance, overgrazing in Karnataka has severely affected the ability of cattle in several districts in the state to withstand drought.

On the whole, the book is comprehensive but not quite authoritative. In spite of this, it is a valuable addition to the existing literature on disasters. The agony of the author that disaster mitigation does not find its rightful place in our educational curricula is justified. It is hoped that this lacuna will be rectified soon.

V. S. RAMAMURTHY

*National Institute of Advanced Studies,  
Indian Institute of Science Campus,  
Bangalore 560 012, India  
e-mail: vsramamurthy@nias.iisc.ernet.in*