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BOOK REVIEW

Disaster Management: In the Wake of a Flood by Shaik Iftikhar Ahmed

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Just picking up the newspaper during this monsoon season and glancing through the various news coverage of floods in Bihar, Assam, Punjab and so on was enough to convince me of the need and timeliness of this book entitled "Disaster Management: In the wake of a flood" by Dr. Shaik Iftikhar Ahmed. Published by Twenty First Century publications based in Patiala, it is very much a product of the region, by the region, and for the region. It is important to add that this book while strongly rooted in the Punjab context has a very global resonance especially now after the New Orleans episode of 2004. The author states that his focus is on diagnosing the disaster and on suggesting strategies for managing the disaster. The disaster referred to in this case are the floods that are annual feature in Patiala district, occurring during the monsoon season. Dr. Ahmed argues that since the floods are an annual feature and because their intensity has increased in the past few decades – it is imperative that we understand the causes and characteristics of these floods in order to plan for an effective response strategy.

' Disaster Management: in the wake of a flood' therefore offers a very comprehensive analysis of the various aspects related to the flood vulnerability in Patiala district. It is divided into seven chapters starting with a rationale for the study explained in the first

chapter. Chapter two describes the study area of Patiala and also does a very thorough job of detailing the relief and describing the drainage basin for both perennial and seasonal rivers and streams. Along with the written descriptions the book offers good illustrations of the drainage basin which when read together with the landforms map provide informative analysis of the flood plains of Patiala. This chapter provides a comprehensive and descriptive picture of Patiala that help derive one of Dr. Ahmed's central arguments that floods are not purely a natural phenomenon but that socio-economic and cultural factors are equally important in assessing vulnerability. Thereafter Dr. Ahmed goes on to write about the people, economy, administrative set-up and historical background of Patiala.

In Chapter three, entitled 'Patiala floods: a historical review', Dr. Ahmed divides the history of the floods in Patiala into two time periods – those that happened before 1960 and those that happened after 1960. The 1960 break has been chosen since after that year the Government of India has maintained detailed records of the floods in Patiala. Prior to that there is less organized documentation. Also the years after the partition witnessed a significant change in the human-environment interaction in Punjab. This is attributed to the large scale migrations, reclaiming of forest land for agriculture and the processes and products that accompanied the green revolution such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides and irrigation canals. Dr. Ahmed argues that despite a lot of government infrastructural assistance to the region the flood aspect was not taken into

consideration while planning an agricultural economy in Punjab. Subsequently, the intensity of the floods has increased alongside the vulnerability of the people and their property.

The description of Patiala *Nadi* as the young girl demanding her ritualistic rights from her maternal family is very interesting and enables us to visualize the cultural relationship that the people of Patiala share with their river. Floods are a disaster common to many different parts of the world but there cannot be a blanket solution for all. The unique socio-cultural and environmental situation in each place needs to be understood in order to provide a solution that will work. Geographers are best suited to study and explain these place based differences and Dr. Ahmed carries this burden well. The next chapter primarily details the 1993 floods that were the worst in many decades. Here Dr. Ahmed describes the various factors that led to the disastrous floods listing prolonged heavy rainfall, release of water from reservoirs, deforestation, urbanization, encroachments on drainage lines, meandering channels, structure of embankments and the political / administrative processes among others. The same chapter also reveals the extent and affects of the floods – both socio-economic and ecological. This chapter, I think, is the most useful for policy makers and relief implementation agencies to understand past mistakes and formulate an effective disaster management strategy. It is also a chapter that substantiates the position well articulated in this book that disasters are truly consequences of misplanned human urban and rural development and of socio-economic and political failures. The planning of railway lines and roads, the design of channels and the structure of embankments- all of these need to be taken into account as we plan for disaster management.

Chapter six focuses on the vulnerability

of the various administrative blocks of Patiala district. These are illustrated in the chapter using maps and assigning high, moderate and low degrees of vulnerability to these blocks. Dr. Ahmed combines all of the analysis of the previous chapters to suggest strategies for managing the recurring floods in Patiala.

The seventh chapter, that outlines strategies, points out that both structural and non- structural measures need to be in place for effective flood management. Structural measures suggested by Dr. Ahmed include afforestation, dams, storage reservoirs, well maintained embankments, removing the sinuosity of the channels, checking encroachments and waste disposal, de-silting, rain water harvesting, injection wells and the revival of local lakes and ponds. The non structural measures include flood plain zoning- forecasting and effective warning along with rehabilitation measures and flood plains.

I think this is a very comprehensive analysis of the flood situation in Patiala district – one that is not a mere academic study but one that has clear on-the-ground practical benefits. The emphasis on fieldwork is the real strength of the book and the author has been able to bring out the very particular local characteristics and the intricate web of human-environment relationship in the region. In a later edition, or in further research, I would like to see this aspect getting more explicit attention. For example, the author mentions a few local strategies for flood management giving the case of the locals who fiercely guarded the embankments during the 1993 floods. Many more such stories of the indigenous responses to the flood can be brought out. It is imperative that a flood management strategy be worked out in collaboration with the residents rather than being a top down approach from the expert. This book is a step in that direction and these steps can be taken much further along the

collaborative approach.

Another aspect that can be further detailed is the differential vulnerability based on socio-economic factors of class, caste and gender and thereby incorporate these differences in the disaster response strategy. A strength of this book are the visuals that have been produced by the author after intensive research combining topo maps and fieldwork. I think it will help the reader better if the photographs are made part of the text rather than being an appendix at the back. These pictures that the author has photographed are extremely informative and help visualize the textual descriptions especially for someone who is not familiar with the Patiala district. In terms of the maps if there could be some way of including transparent overlays such that one can see the drainage basins in relation to the Patiala topography maps or Patiala transport maps that will greatly enhance the power of these maps.

A more detailed description of the methodology in a subsequent edition will also

be greatly appreciated especially if the author explains his own positionality. As I read through this book I wondered if Dr. Ahmed belonged to Patiala? Was he there during the 1993 floods? Did he visit the relief and rehabilitation camps? While the author states that fieldwork was conducted, it will help to know the specifics such as did field-work include interviews, or surveys? Where and how was archival data retrieved and so on?

Apart from these minor suggestions I want to reassert that this is indeed a very timely and important book and Dr. Ahmed has done a great job in bringing to the fore many interrelated aspects of the disastrous floods in Patiala. I want to conclude by thanking Dr. Ahmed for producing such a valuable piece of analysis and would urge the policy makers and the government officials to use this analysis in planning their relief operations.

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