Colonialism, Capitalism, Catastrophe: A Case Study of the Intersection of Disaster and Colonialism in Darjeeling

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Abstract: *This paper explores the intersection of disaster, colonialism, and capitalism in Darjeeling, using the 1934 Bihar-Nepal earthquake as a critical lens to understand historical processes of urbanization and vulnerability. Drawing on the framework proposed by Aguilar, Pante, and Tugado (2016), it argues that disasters are not isolated ruptures but deeply embedded in long-term socio-environmental transformations. The essay traces the colonial development of Darjeeling as a hill station, its strategic significance, and the disastrous impact of British resource extraction and urban planning on indigenous Lepcha populations. Through the case of the 1934 earthquake, this paper reveals how disasters become opportunities for state intervention, political maneuvering, and the propagation of capitalist logics, often exacerbating existing class, caste, and gender inequalities. The study critiques the hegemonic and linear narratives of development, highlighting the persistent environmental and social consequences of commodifying nature in vulnerable regions.*

Keywords: Colonial Urbanism, Colonialisme and Urbanisation, Disaster and Capitalism, Disaster Politics, environmetalal History, Indigenous Dispossession, Urban studies

INTRODUCTION

The analysis of disasters as key events to understand historical processes is a relatively recent and unique sub-branch of environmental history. Scholars such as Aguilar, Pante, and Tugado (2016) have sought to understand disasters not as isolated events but rather as deeply embedded in long-term historical processes with shifts in society, politics, and the environment. Disasters serve as critical junctures for historians to analyze the socio-environmental impacts of urbanization and colonialism in the Philippines. These events expose the vulnerabilities created by these processes, allowing historians to examine how they intersect and exacerbate one another. This essay, drawing on Aguilar, Pante, and Tugado's understanding of disasters, places the urbanization of the geographically vulnerable region of Darjeeling in the historical context of colonialism, the impact of the 1934 earthquake, and the ways in which similar disasters have been used to reshape urban landscapes and social relations. Ultimately, it is also a case to criticize the hegemonic understanding of development.

Capitalism and urbanization are ongoing processes of landscape transformation, alienation of indigenes from their sustenance, and conversion of nature into commodities, all in the name of development, which profits few. Capitalism has imposed a form of development that is monolithic, linear, and environmentally destructive. Modern scientific thought, which heavily bases our understanding of "development," propagates the binaries of civilization (culture) and nature, where humans conquer and control nature. When such a hegemonic way of life is imposed, in the form of urbanization, especially in geographically vulnerable regions such as cyclone and earthquake-prone regions, a greater impact on the environment is experienced.

This essay explains the conjecture between urbanization and environmental destruction in the event of a disaster, taking the 1934 Bihar Earthquake as a case study. The research region is the hilly region of North Bengal, Darjeeling, which served as the summer capital of British colonial Bengal. This article argues that through the case study of the Earthquake, the historical processes that shaped and made Darjeeling are a narrative of capitalism and urbanization intrinsically woven with colonization.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF DARJEELING: THE STORY OF URBANISATION: THE POLITICAL AND MEDICAL

Urbanization in Darjeeling was a colonial effort. The British, searching for a home far away from home,

looked towards the hills as a space to Mold into their mini-England.[1] Darjeeling, like other hill stations, was perceived as the "other," the binary to the hotter, disease-ridden, and overcrowded Indian cities. From the mid-nineteenth century, hill stations such as Darjeeling, Shimla, and Ootacamund were established.[2]

Such development can be located within the nineteenth century, when we observe a hardening of racial categories, where polygenist theories assigned races to their unique climatic locations. Contrasting the plains, the hills were less crowded, with healthier air, suitable for the Europeans, as against the 'tropicality' of the plains, which was blamed for driving the Europeans mad. Notions of tropicality reached such bizarre extent that it was believed that when Europeans crossed eastwards, moving towards the Orient, they would be regarded as a distinct species, changed by the tropical forests and arid plains of the Indian peninsula.[3] Within such discourse on race, climate, and medical discourse, Darjeeling was seen as a potential sanatorium town.

Darjeeling's history is also one of political contestation, territorial annexation, colonization, and power struggles. In 1816, the British seized much of the western Himalayan Terai, including Darjeeling, from Nepal, and the following year, transferred Darjeeling to the Sikkim king to function as a buffer between Nepal and British India.[4]

Darjeeling was located in a geopolitically strategic position, especially after 1828 CE.[56] It commanded the historic Kalimpong-Lhasa trade route, the shortest route to Tibet and a part of the Southeast Silk route, which provided access to trade networks with Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim. Access to these areas was more important when we remember that the opium wars with China were brewing.[7] Alongside such narratives of urbanization, it is essential to remember that Darjeeling was not a *terra nullius*. British colonization and urbanization were based on the bloody dispossession of the local indigenous people, the tribal Lepchas. Attitudes towards the indigenes changed over time. Scholars such as Dane Kennedy (1996) argue that initially, the British understood the Lepchas as the 'guardians' of Eden, as they were more compliant and did not resist annexation violently or militarily and were more accepting of missionaries.[8] Furthermore, they were a source of domestic labor for British households.[9] The attitudes towards Lepchas changed in the context of British efforts to establish lucrative tea plantations in Darjeeling.

Plantation in Darjeeling sped up the process of urbanization, unleashing forces that drastically transformed its landscape. The first attempts to establish tea plantations can be traced to the early 1840s, with trial tea gardens in Lebong in the 1850s and the first proper tea garden in Upper Takvar in 1852.[10] Tea plantations in Darjeeling have a wider political context. A British company in the 1800s was involved in a triangular trade with China, where they paid for Chinese tea by exchanging opium (from India). With the Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860), the British were anxious to lose their source of tea and looked inward towards British India to grow tea.[11]

Tea production was labor-intensive, and due to the limited labor available, the British turned to Nepal as a source of migrant labor. The desire to earn more profits in tea plantations played a role in increasing transport facilities, such as the famous toy train in Darjeeling that was initially introduced to carry timber and tea to the markets.

The interest in Darjeeling was also based on the extraction of resources. The region was a rich source of timber, tea plantations were established, and efforts were made to grow cinchona, which would aid deeper colonization in the humid forests as they served as a medicine for malaria.

Darjeeling's urbanization is the history of many British ambitions political, resource-extractive, revenue extraction, medical, and leisure. Concomitantly, it is also the history of the dispossession of the indigenous Lepcha population.

1934 EARTHQUAKE: DISASTERS AND THE FORCES IT UNLEASHED

At 2:13 pm, on January 15th, 1934, an earthquake of 8.08.4 Richter scale struck Bihar-Nepal and parts of Bengal.[12] The tremors from the earthquake extended across nearly 1.9 million square miles (approximately 4.9 million square kilometres), covering vast regions of both India and Tibet.[13] Tremors were felt in cities as far apart as Mumbai, Calcutta, Agra, and Dehra Dun. Owing to the impacts on communication and transport, it was difficult to determine the scale of destruction. Shortly after the earthquake, the British government deployed experts to deduce the disaster from a geological perspective. The death toll was not as high as the proportion of property damage. However, the death toll of women was higher than that of men in the disaster, as it occurred during the day when women were inside, engaged in domestic work.[14]

After Bihar, the worst affected area in British India was the Darjeeling region; however, there is a dearth of sources regarding the impact of the earthquake on the region. The surface cracks were filled with sand to prevent rainwater from entering. Buildings were destroyed, and houses were damaged by bulging and collapse of the east-west walls, which allowed the centre and roof to collapse.[15] Several structures were damaged, including the Government House, Campbell cottage, Rockville Hotel, and the Cantonment buildings of Jalapahar and Lebong, schools, the Gymkhana Club, and the Planters' Club. Property damage was considerable in tea estates. Several older bungalows of heavy stone masonry were either shattered and partially collapsed or uninhabitable as a result of extensive cracking.[16]

Reports have argued that such infrastructure was damaged because it was relatively old. Reports such as the 1935 preliminary account of Auden, the Assistant Superintendent of the Geological Survey of India (GSI hereafter), commented on the weak construction and poor foundation, often laid in loosely aggregated sub-soil, which caused the damage due to the inability to handle the tremors.[17] He suggested a variety of ways of constructing houses to prevent such damage, such as high buildings with deep foundations and the use of construction materials such as ferro-concrete, mortar, and cement.[18]

DISASTERS AS POLITICAL AND SOCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

Disasters, particularly those like the 1934 Bihar-Nepal earthquake, often serve as pivotal moments for

political manoeuvring and the propagation of ideas. The colonial state's intervention in twentieth-century disasters was more active than earlier, where revenue remissions and sometimes funding were provided.[19] Tirthankar Roy (2008) argues that such interventions in the twentieth century was due to the destruction of state capacity in such disasters and also the institutional problems that rebuilding caused.[20] However, if we situate the January 1934 earthquake, political contestations can also be one reason for greater state involvement. The disaster struck during the Civil Disobedience Movement, an important political phase of the freedom movement.[21] Meanwhile, the 1930s witnessed extreme radicalism in Bengal, such as the Chittagong army raid. In such a politically charged decade, the British sought to establish and propagate their hold through relief measures.

Furthermore, disasters serve as opportunities to reshape society. The destruction of the region and the psychological weakening serve as fertile ground for reordering society, where modern nation-states have exploited disasters as a pretext and excuse to secure long-held political goals. This is what Borland (2006) calls "capitalizing on catastrophe."[22] Similarly, Naomi Klein, in her 2007 book "The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism "argues how capitalism exploits crises and disasters to implement neoliberal economic policies. By exploiting public disorientation and shattered communities, Klein argues that neoliberal capitalism thrives on exploiting crises whether natural disasters, wars, or economic downturns to push through policies such as privatization, deregulation, and cuts in government spending. These policies often benefit corporate interests at the expense of ordinary citizens.[23] Similarly, the 1934 earthquake served as a breeding ground for the colonial state to propagate ideas and changes.

Earthquake reconstruction served as an opportunity to change and impose urban landscapes under the pretext of building earthquake-safe markets and more. Similar to the post 2015 earthquake, earthquake-proof apartments were the most desirable assets. Such disasters are perfect opportunities for capitalist enterprises and the market to sell products/assets that would somehow seem to provide "solutions" to the frenzy of public disorientation. In this case as well, advertisements by the Concrete Association of India with their examples of 'earthquake proof buildings' displayed photographs of undamaged concrete houses in Darjeeling.[24]

Awareness of the environmental consequences of urbanization on vulnerable terrain seems to have been present in the colonial period. Memoirs of the GSI on the 1934 earthquake commented on such matters, pushing for legislations to make houses suitable for such earthquake-prone zones:

"From both a Scientific and engineering viewpoint, the whole of Northern India, within, say, 200 miles of the foothills of the Himalayas, must be regarded as a region particularly susceptible to severe earthquakes. It has been repeatedly urged by the Geological Survey that the design of structures in this area should lie controlled by legislation as it is in Japan and New Zealand." (Roy, 1939)

However, even with such awareness, the extent to which efforts to legislate controls on building structures were implemented is questionable. Marcussen mentions that such legislative attempts were not visible in Nepal. After the rthquake, structures were created with heavy ornamentation, which was advised against by the GSI.[25]

INTERSECTIONALITIES IN DISASTER

Furthermore, the reconstruction suggested by the GSI provided an avenue for further state intervention and reconstruction of towns to benefit the colonial forces. Town planning was imposed, which brought resistance from the people, fearing the loss of property. In rebuilding projects, undamaged property is appropriated using legislative action for road building.[26] Furthermore, the poor were anxious that if such land-grabbing policies were continued, the rich would buy the best plots. [27]Meanwhile, the poor had lost their land, which was located near the bazaar, and the British desired to reconstruct the market area.[28] The lower classes not only lost their lands, but they could not afford to buy a new plot either, as compensation was meagre. The rich had more to ose because of the reconstruction but had the means to compensate for their losses.

As all processes in history and in the present do not affect all social groups equally, disasters are not a homogeneous experience. Disasters such as the 1934 earthquake are not socially neutral; they disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Tirthankar Roy, in his 2008 article on 1934 earthquake argues that natural disasters like earthquakes are more "class neutral" than man-made disasters like war. He writes that both the poor and the rich suffer losses. However, there is a clear class dimension to disaster reconstruction, where the upper classes have more means to compensate than the lower classes. [29]

Disasters, whether natural or man-made, are never socially neutral; they do not impact all sections of the population equally. Intersectionality's exist in disasters, especially in the reconstruction phases. We discussed class as one of the social realities in experiencing disasters; we also have gender. The death toll for women was higher in the 1934 earthquake because they were within households, which is a testament to one of the gendered perspectives on disasters. Nafeez Ahmed, a British Journalist and scholar, strongly argues for the gendered experience of disasters, where women's unequal access to resources and technologies which socially handicaps women during disasters, with war and natural disasters as breeding grounds for sexual violence against women.[30]

CONCLUSION

The 1934 Bihar-Nepal earthquake profoundly impacted Darjeeling. The disaster damaged key infrastructure, including government buildings and tea estates, highlighting the vulnerability of colonial-era construction to seismic events. More importantly, the earthquake was a moment to realize and contemplate the environmental damage caused by urbanization, which, in Darjeeling's case, ran concomitantly with colonialism. Although not with the 1934 earthquake, landslides are a part and parcel of seismic tremors for most earthquakes in hilly regions, which further destabilizes the local economy with a greater loss of life. Disasters often reveal and aggravate existing social inequalities, such as gender, class, and caste. This case study also illustrates how disasters can be exploited to advance neoliberal policies and reinforce

existing power structures, a phenomenon that continues to shape urban development in vulnerable regions, such as Darjeeling. Ultimately, this is a criticism of the capitalist notion of development.

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