

Global Disasters

Statement 1. 'Global vulnerability is increasing, not decreasing, and the reasons go beyond the increasing severity of natural events'.

Natural disasters traditionally were considered to be caused by environmental conditions like volcanoes, cyclones, earthquakes, droughts, etc. Human contribution in the disasters was underestimated. However, in the early 1980s there was radical critique from social geographers on environmental lines: they argued that humans were also responsible in the advent of disorders. 'Sociologists...are concerned almost exclusively with the structures, functions and activities of formal organizations and the impact of disasters upon them and generally accord the environment a minor role'¹. According to them, disaster is defined as something framed by human behavior at a specific moment.

Another definition of disaster, which has become widespread, describes disaster as an integral part of the environment and the human system. Supporters of this definition give emphasis to towns, community, regions, etc. and other developments which make them vulnerable to the eminent natural disasters. Thus, the argument rests on the belief that disasters are embedded in the daily human conditions. It means that there's a link between society, culture and environment.

So far, the definitions of disaster provided by the geographers, anthropologists and other social scientists are related to the environment. However, Anthony Oliver-Smith has a different opinion on the notion of disaster and associates it with a wide

¹ G. Bankoff, *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 154.

array of contemporary problems². He pays attention to the fact that different specialists examine the essence of disaster concentrating only on their own sphere of knowledge, as in case of organizational behavior (sociology), place (geography), and policy assessment (political science). Therefore, it would be wrong to take into account only a particular aspect while theorizing about disaster.

It is believed that disasters are caused by the vulnerability of human society. Vulnerability may be of different kinds: natural, physical, economic, social, political, technological, ideological, cultural, educational, ecological, and institutional. These have been embedded in a value chain where the ideologies of political and economic systems affect the allocation and distribution of resources and believe that these ideologies are the root cause of disasters. Thus, the vulnerability theorists believe that disasters are caused by society, not by nature.

The Green Revolutionists have argued that the western world has relentlessly furthered the limits of the environment in order to gain economic profit. According to them, such behavior has disturbed the natural balance of the ecology resulting in disasters. Therefore, it can be said that the main cause of disaster is not natural since very often disasters are provoked by the human activity.

Statement 2. 'One of the first goals of authorities after any disaster is to deny its predictability'.

Authorities' ideas are mainly rooted in the traditional view of disaster where they blindly give the reason for the disaster to natural causes unforeseen or unpredictable by

² A. Oliver-Smith, 'Theorizing Disaster: Nature, Culture, and Power' in *Culture and Catastrophe: The Anthropology of Disaster*, S.M. Hoffman and A. Oliver-Smith (eds), The School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2002.

them. It is similar to the guilty feeling of the survivors of a disaster who are unable to associate themselves with a world in which their neighbors died and they survived³.

Those people lay the responsibility for this case on God. Similar is the situation with the authorities.

For instance, consider the case of Grassy Narrow happened in 1979⁴. The plant emitted waste methyl mercury into the river. This infected the fishes and those who consumed the water. As this mercury could not be traced in the human tissue and affected the most vulnerable parts of human body, it caused a danger to the health of the residents in the area. When the blood and hair samples were tested pathologically, there were no specific instances of poisoning which could be found, thus, making the result inconclusive. This clearly indicates that the authorities were fast enough to find a non-human related reason for a disaster and showed that they hadn't been in the position to predict it earlier. Though the mercury had initially been emitted by the paper mill, when it reached Grassy Narrow, it had already been absorbed by the environment, so the blame obviously fell on nature.

As most disasters are brought about by natural causes, it becomes easy for authorities to put the blame on nature, which, of course, cannot be predicted. For instance, when a typhoon occurs, it is difficult to understand what the real cause of it is. However, the authorities invariably blame it on natural cycle which is above their control.

This avoidance of the reason of a disaster on the part of the authorities is related to the political aspects of risk. In the pre-industrial society the causes of natural

³ K. Erikson, *In the Wake of Flood*, George Unwin and Allen, London, 1976.

⁴ A. Erikson, *New Species of Trouble: Explorations in Disaster, Trauma, and Community*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1994.

disasters were invariably assigned to supernatural forces. In the industrial era the blame shifted to the wider societal forces.

Now let's look at Bangladesh, a country situated in the Asian subcontinent. The country is always open to repeated natural disasters like flood⁵. People living in the area are accustomed to the situation and set their crop cycles in tune with the periods of floods. This reduces the vulnerability of the area. However, the authorities fail to make a dam or reservoir to prevent the flood in the first place. The reason is again blamed on natural causes. However, this is a preventive disaster as its advent is cyclic and can be predicted.

⁵ Bankoff, op.cit., p.140.

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