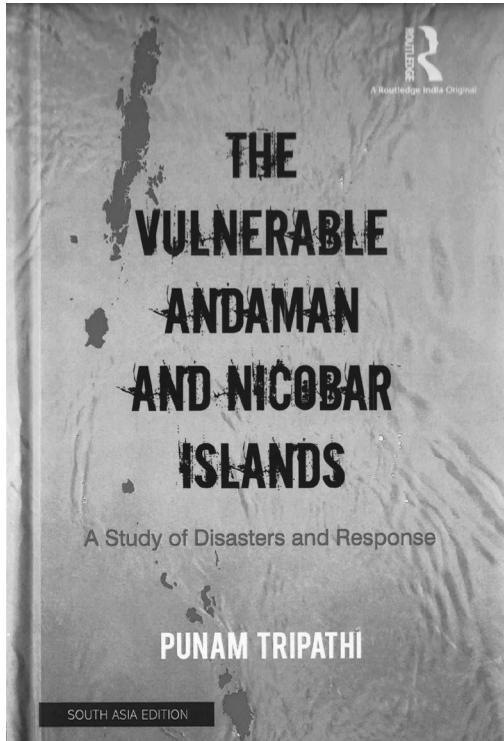


Book Review - 1

The Vulnerable Andaman and Nicobar Islands: A Study of Disasters and Response

Routledge: London and New York. Price Rs. 1095/- (only for the South Asia edition)



The title of the book proclaims the intention of the book. It is going to be a treatise wherein ‘disasters will be addressed through the lens of vulnerability’. Such an assertion shifts the mind of the reader from natural phenomena as the cause of disasters to human agencies as the real culprit. The book insists that disasters like earthquakes, cyclones and floods are wrongly labeled as natural disasters. These events are essentially triggered

by anthropogenic factors which pierce through the prevailing vulnerability to have a free play of destruction.

The scope of the book is much more inclusive. It explains how vulnerability is built in remote, tranquil, tribal islands. This is attributed to subjugation of the indigenous by outsiders, especially colonial powers, who exploit their resources in the name of development. The book goes further and provides a discussion on the sequence of response, recovery and resilience in the aftermath of a disaster.

With such a basic framework, the book is structured into 11 chapters. The first is concerned with identification of disasters which took shape in or visited the Andaman and Nicobar Islands since the mid-nineteenth century. This was the time when the British started colonizing them with effect from 1857 and retained their hold till 1947 when India became independent. Then the focus shifts to three major phases of disasters in terms of epidemics in the 19th century (chapter 2), World War II and partition of the Indian subcontinent in the 20th century (chapters 3 and 4), and tsunami in the 21st century (chapter 5). Chapters 6 to 10 provide a comprehensive coverage to tsunami with reference to damage, vulnerability, response, compensation and recovery, in that successive order. The 11th concluding

chapter provides a synthesis of the three phases of disasters and reinforces the ideas arrived at in different chapters.

Taking into consideration the span of last nearly two centuries, one learns that though the Andaman Sea is a breeding ground of cyclones, the cyclone linked disasters have been minuscule in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The disasters associated with earthquakes have also been insignificant. This is enough to correct any wrong perception. One early widespread disaster in these islands was the epidemic of syphilis which wiped out 90 per cent of the tribal population. A kind of contact of the tribals, 'who were made to work as help at residences of the British', proved fatal for them. The prevalence of syphilis was mainly in the Andaman Islands and little in the Nicobar Islands which virtually remained immune from the direct British contact.

During the World War II, the Japanese, fighting against the British, entered the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in 1942. The earlier air raids by the Japanese had destroyed the limited infrastructure had been laid in the islands. The misery of the Islands was compounded by later air raiding by the British on their occupation by the Japanese till 1945. The British ships carrying food and other supplies were also the victim of regular raids. With food becoming scarce, famine conditions followed. Also the people incapable of hard labour, such as the disabled, elderly, women and children, were killed in large numbers. All this summed up a scene of deadly disaster rooted in vulnerability of helpless people.

The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 was not without its disastrous implications for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The event had an exchange of millions of displaced people across the two countries of India and Pakistan. Initially several of the displaced persons who had moved from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to West Bengal were resettled in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. To populate the Islands further, some of the Tamils who were repatriated from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) were provided a shelter here. A number of ex-servicemen were also accommodated on these islands. It seems that Andaman and Nicobar Islands were treated as dump yard of any kind of displaced or refuge seeking persons. Many of them were poor. They were settled on tribal lands, depriving the natives of their basic resource and rendering them vulnerable.

It was in the context of such vulnerability of the people that tsunami made its frontal attack on the Islands in 2004. The event was devastating. Several small islands were marooned. A number of inhabitants died but many were left homeless. Infrastructure of all kinds was damaged. Impact on livelihood of people was gruesome. By reason of its direct location on the route of tsunami, Nicobar Islands suffered disproportionately more than the Andaman Islands.

Following the havoc caused by the tsunami an immediate response followed on the part of government, NGOs and others. A package of relief, reconstruction, and rehabilitation became operational. A field survey revealed that priority was given to reactivation of infrastructure,

reconstruction of houses, and restoration of livelihoods. Cash compensation was given for loss of agricultural land, standing crops, livestock, fishing gears, small businesses, and damaged houses. Nearly half of the funds disbursed were meant for reconstruction of houses. A substantial part of the money received was not ploughed in for the intended purpose. Much of it was consumed rather than invested. The vulnerability of the people was not resolved on long term basis.

The final 'conclusion' chapter is most powerful in representing the whole book. It gives a graphic picture, in a comparative mode, of the three phases of disasters through which the Andaman and Nicobar Islands passed since the arrival of the British to begin with during the last two centuries. A striking message gets built that the native islanders were regularly rendered vulnerable by non-islanders.

It is a consistent pursuit of the above idea wherein lies the real strength of the book. Such a viewpoint is born out of a conviction and is based on a meaningful perusal of extensive literature, conduct of an intensive analysis of data, and interface with the people in the field. The book is well written, tightly crafted, and cogently

argued. It is rich in historical details viewed in a geographical perspective. It convincingly demonstrates that history is destiny with a tendency to create a new geography every time.

The book sprouted from a Ph.D. thesis which was nurtured under the care of Professor AnuKapur, whose seminal contribution to Indian Geography is widely acclaimed. The young scholar effectively responded to the quality of supervision received and produced a work which found a ready acceptance by the Routledge, London and New York, for its publication. One can hope that this excellent book of hers will have many successors in years to come. The present book carries a special value for scholars and students of disaster management, environmental studies, and social sciences. It is a required reading for the concerned government officials. The general reader will also find it unmissable.

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