

### The Transculturality of Historical Disasters: Governance and the Materialisation of Glocalisation

**Veranstalter:** Junior Research Group A6 „Cultures of Disaster. Shifting Asymmetries between Societies, Cultures and Nature from a Comparative Historical and Transcultural Perspective“, Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context“, Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg University; Cluster Liaison Office New Delhi; Goethe-Institut, Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi

**Datum, Ort:** 03.03.2011–05.03.2011, New Delhi

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The third and concluding workshop organised by the Junior Research Group (JRG) „Cultures of Disaster“ addressed governance and transcultural processes in historical ‘natural’ disasters in South Asia. In line with the two previous workshops „Hybridity of Historical Disasters: Nature, Society, and Power“ (Beirut, 2010) and „Learning from Disaster from Antiquity to Early Modern Times: Knowledge and Experience, Flow and Blockage“ (Heidelberg, 2009), the workshop focused on a thematic aspect of the JRG’s research. It aimed to stimulate interdisciplinary research exchange on a thematic aspect of disasters in order to explain how cultural perceptions, interpretations and reactions to disasters took shape throughout history in South Asia. As may be discerned from the titles of the workshops, the research group explores the relationship between nature and society by analysing transcultural processes in Europe, the Middle East and South Asia. The research into cultural histories of disasters has involved fruitful interdisciplinary collaborations with experts in order to grasp the cultural and social mechanisms at work in disasters.

As GERRIT SCHENK (Darmstadt/Heidelberg) stated in the introduction,

a ‘natural’ disaster is often the outcome of interaction between various physical, cultural, social, economic and political factors. ‘Governance’ is thereby at the core of disasters since a ‘catastrophic event’ may turn into a disaster depending on a society’s coping abilities. The societal processes which are part of governance include various ways of utilising, inventing and reconstructing local knowledge. This social interaction between institutions and individuals highlights how ideas and practices – whether originating in a South Asian context or emerging from elsewhere – have been incorporated, transformed or renewed in the process of glocalisation in South Asia.<sup>1</sup>

The workshop’s first session was devoted to interpretations of disasters, thus giving insights into the various ways natural disasters have been received in society throughout history with special reference to South Asia.

AUDRIUS BEINORIUS (Vilnius) opened the first session with a paper on divinatory understandings of natural disasters in primary Sanskrit sources. He explained how translations of Mesopotamian omen literature into Indian languages were gradually adapted to suit the Indian intellectual traditions, most notably in Indian astrology and divination literature (*jyotiḥśāstra*). However, *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, composed by Varamihira in the 5th century, became the most influential astrological work on divination, portents of natural disasters and other threats. An important aspect of Indian astrological tradition is that the stars could be pacified through proprietary rituals in order to avoid disasters. Thus the omens gave humans scope to perceive their actions as having an impact on the cosmos. In sum, the paper argued for the necessity to analyze astrological interpretations of disasters as an integral part of a cosmological worldview in order to understand their cultural meaning.

ELEONOR MARCUSSEN (Heidelberg) continued the session on interpretations with a case study on contradicting and sometimes overlapping readings of an earthquake in

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Robertson, *Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity–Heterogeneity*, in: M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (Eds.), *Global Modernities*, London 1995, p. 25–44.

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Bihar in 1934. The event gave rise to a number of explanations for causes of earthquakes, both in elaborate astrological accounts and in speculative scientific theories brought forward by geologists. Even though the explanations often stood in stark contrast to each other, the astrological explanations found support in scientific theories on gravitation and the planetary positions' influence on earthquakes.

VIKAS LAKHANI (Ahmedabad) explored the concept of risk in the daily lives of three communities facing environmental hazards in rural parts of contemporary Gujarat. Several examples highlighted how human interaction with nature influence people's and communities' perception and strategies in coping with environmental risk and potential natural disasters. This was evident in the diverse ways permanent resident and migrant communities drew upon different cultural perceptions of nature, but also contextual geographical and socio-economic factors played a decisive role in determining risk perceptions.

EDWARD SIMPSON (London) presented yet another aspect of interpretations of disasters. The keynote lecture illustrated how sociological reason in the aftermath of the Kutch earthquake of 26 January 2001 emerged as „quite ordinary explanations for an extraordinary event“. Comparing it to Lisbon earthquake 1755, Simpson showed the distinct responses the earthquake as an extraordinary event evoked. In the case of Kutch, 'sin' or other provocations of the divine order projected the blame inwards on one's self. The narratives of blame and explanation can be seen as a way to rationalize the catastrophe along social existing relations in Kutch. Departing from these experiences, he pointed to the „vernacular sociological reason“ of the interpretations. The keynote lecture was commented by ANU KAPUR (Delhi). Most notably she highlighted the changes in the vernacular sociological reason with the arrival of colonialism. 'Traditional' responses to disasters treated extreme natural events as part of a 'religious' cosmological order. Only after introducing nature as an independent geophysical force the concept of 'natural' disasters appeared.

The first day ended with the opening of

the photo exhibition „Flooded with Memories: Portraits of Inundation from Assam“ by Kazu Ahmed (Delhi). Between 1998 and 2008, the village Matmora in Assam gradually disappeared into the depths of Brahmaputra. Matmora's inhabitants, *Mising* people, adjusted to the new conditions and carried on life in stilted houses on an embankment close to the submerged village. The exhibition highlighted how people dependent on a fluctuating landscape cope with disasters and their perceptions of identity in relation to the land.

The second day began with a session on floods and rivers, contrasting the everydayness and calamitous experience of living in a flooded landscape. With the intention to (re)construct social histories of agrarian farmers (*raiya*s) through archival sources, NITIN SINHA (Berlin) illustrated the colonial state's and the peasantry's relationship with the fluid soil of *diara* lands along the Ganges in Bihar. Due to the invisibility of the actual cultivators for the larger part of the 19th century, Sinha let the official letters and statistics speak of the shifting land conditions for those farmers who had to bear in mind what officials called 'property'.

ROHAN D'SOUZA (Delhi) showed how flood dependent deltas like the Ganges delta in Bengal Presidency were transformed into flood prone areas during British colonial period and the positive aspects of the transforming landscapes gave way to calamity management. This conceptual shift was largely ignored by post-independence governments which inherited the disaster management mechanisms of their colonial predecessors.

MONISANKAR MISRA (Tripura) constructed a narrative on how the 1929 Assam floods came to be known as „the deluge“. The paper underlined the political context of the floods in Suram-Barak Valley and questioned their 'natural' character in the light of increasing population density as a result of work opportunities on tea plantations and the construction of a railway line. However, according to archival sources, these human interventions affected the dimension of the floods but not to their occurrence, for which the slash and burn agriculture in the hills contributed at least as much; instead, excessive

rainfall rather than governance seems to have been the official explanation for the floods.

Expanding on the theme of disaster as a social construct, PRAVIN K. KUSHWAHA (Delhi) depicted the constructed vulnerability of some inhabitants of Delhi during the flooding of poor neighbourhoods caused by the Yamuna river in 2010. He showed that government relief was considered an emergency measure, and conservation of historic buildings a short term engagement as opposed to larger urban planning processes. He contextualized the reluctance of the inhabitants to leave their houses and possessions with the preparations for the Commonwealth Games for which Delhi was about to be transformed into a „world-class city“. In conclusion, the papers presented in the session on floods and rivers gave importance to governance and the state's responsibilities and policies; at the same time they also emphasised local coping mechanisms in dealing with disaster.

The session on famines mainly dealt with responses in the form of relief work as well as official colonial and non-official responses. GEORGINA BREWIS (London) argued that a British voluntary „ideal of service“ was partly defined through encounters with Indian non-official voluntary relief work during famines from the late 18th to the beginning of the 20th century. In contrast to colonial representations of India as a „land of famine“, Indian accounts asserted India as a „land of charity“. The paper also suggested that the British-Indian encounters in relief work, especially fund-raising and cooperation between groups during the last quarter of the 19th century, were formative for Indian social service activities in the beginning of the 20th century.

The monsoon as a colonial project in the latter half of the 19th century was the main focus of CHARU SINGH (Delhi). She connected the colonisers' experience of different weather patterns in India with the establishment of a central meteorological institute which was used to investigate the links between rainfall, disease, agriculture and famine. The paper implied that in order to deal with this disastrous weather, the British tried to harness and accommodate local concepts and coping mechanisms (calendars, differentiation between castes and famine migration)

with the aim to reduce the state's losses in taxes.

By looking at the relief measures of the 1838/39 famine caused by droughts in colonial northwest India, SANJAY SHARMA (Delhi) showed how colonial officials tried to determine the right amount and ways of offering relief so that the affected would neither spoil the labour market nor resort to plundering thereby causing further civil unrest. To render these famine migrants manageable, they were set to work on relief works in exchange for wages which were checked against the 'free' labour market and prison wages for the work of the inmates.

In a like manner to the previous panel, the papers dealing with famines focused on the state's approach and measures, mainly in the 19th century. In general, the papers brought forth the differences in local perceptions and coping mechanisms in contrast to colonial ideals and scientific inventions.

The last two presentations discussed historical evidence for mapping what might have been tsunamis in the 18th and 16th century respectively. The environmental historian RANJAN CHAKRABARTI (Kolkata) argued that the natural calamity which afflicted Calcutta and eastern lower Bengal in 1737 might have been a tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Colonial sources refer interchangeably to the calamity as a „cyclone“, a „storm“ and „high tidal waves“.

ASHOK MARATHE (Pune) gave deep insights into archaeological multifaceted work in an attempt to map a tsunami in the early 16th century. The material remnants, discovered near the coastal village Kelshi in the Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra in 1990, consist of a large sand deposit of more than twenty meters thickness. The objects excavated include coins issued in 1433 A.D., pottery dated at the latest to the 16th century, animal and human bones and skulls belonging to the latter period. Dating of the sand formation may be further substantiated by accounts of an earthquake during Vasco da Gama's third voyage in September 1524, and by a rare finding in the form of a map drawn in January 1539.

One of the major themes throughout the workshop was the cultural processes in-

volved in dealing with natural disasters. In particular, the different interpretative patterns of disasters in the Indian context became evident from the sources used by the participants for their research: be it primary data from interviews in Gujarat, meteorological records and administrative files from the colonial era, or divinatory Sanskrit texts from the 5th century BC. Relying on this material, the participants gave insights into the multiple ways societies had dealt with and perceived disasters. It also became apparent how knowledge on disasters, whether stemming from 'traditional' interpretative patterns or imposed by a development paradigm, co-existed and merged in the process of events that constitute a disaster. The research on historical disasters in South Asia – a quite new and prospective field for research – could be enriched in the future by research on the pre-colonial period and by taking into consideration perceptions and interpretations of disasters found in vernacular literature and mythology. The final discussion underlined the importance of understanding the complexities that emerge, especially when focusing on transcultural processes in historical disasters.

#### **Conference overview:**

##### *Session I: Interpreting Disasters*

Chair: Monica Juneja (Heidelberg)

Gerrit Jasper Schenk (Darmstadt/ Heidelberg): Welcome and Introduction

Audrius Beinorius (Vilnius): Tracing the Will of the Stars: Indian Astrology and Divination about Natural Disasters and Threats

Eleonor Marcussen (Heidelberg): Competing Knowledge: Explanations to the Cause of the Bihar Earthquake 1934

Vikas Lakhani (Ahmedabad): Perception of Environmental Risk among three Communities in Anklesvar, Gujarat

##### *Keynote lecture*

Edward Simpson (London): Sublime Aftershocks: Sociological Reason in the Aftermath of an Earthquake in Gujarat, Western India  
Discussant: Anu Kapur (Delhi)

Photo exhibition by Kazu Ahmed (Delhi): Flooded with Memories: Portraits of Inunda-

tion from Assam

##### *Session II: Floods and Governing Rivers*

Chair: Stefan Knost (Beirut)

Nitin Sinha (Berlin): River, Land and Colonial State: Were 'People' Marginal? Some Examples from the Gangetic *Diara* Areas

Rohan D'Souza (Delhi): Nature as Calamity: The Emergence of Flood Control in Colonial India

Monisankar Misra (Tripura): When the 'Deluge' happened: The Flood of 1929 in Surma-Barak Valley of Colonial Assam

Pravin K. Kushwaha (Delhi): Floods and Urban Planning in Delhi: The Making of an Indian Megacity

##### *Session III: Famine and Famine Relief*

Chair: Gerrit Jasper Schenk (Darmstadt/Heidelberg)

Georgina Brewis (London): 'Land of Famine' or 'Land of Charity'? British-Indian Encounters in Voluntary Famine Relief c. 1770-1901

Charu Singh (Delhi): Negotiating the Monsoon: Drought, Famine and Cattle in the Deccan, 1876-77

Sanjay Sharma (Delhi): A Political Experiment with Political Economy? Managing Famine Relief in Colonial North India

##### *Session IV: Tsunami*

Chair: Stefan Knost (Beirut)

Ranjan Chakrabarti (Kolkata): The Calcutta Cyclone of 1737: Was it a Tsunami?

Ashok Marathe (Pune): Tsunami Deposit at Kelshi, Ratnagiri District, Maharashtra

Tagungsbericht *The Transculturality of Historical Disasters: Governance and the Materialisation of Glocalisation*. 03.03.2011–05.03.2011, New Delhi, in: H-Soz-Kult 20.05.2011.