

Eleonor Marcussen. 2022. *Acts of Aid: Politics of Relief and Reconstruction in the 1934 Bihar-Nepal Earthquake*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Acts of Aid is about the complex relationship between the state and society as experienced during the organization of relief and reconstruction work in the aftermath of the 1934 Bihar-Nepal Earthquake. This earthquake was measured to be 8.1 to 8.4 on the moment magnitude scale (Mw), resulting in death and destruction in the Bihar-Nepal region, as well as prompting huge emergency aid, relief, and reconstruction efforts from diverse actors. Through a meticulous analysis of rich archival material, the book offers valuable insights into how natural disasters are strategically leveraged to construct specific crisis narratives. *Acts of Aid* particularly focuses on the responses of the Indian National Congress (INC) and the colonial administration, both of which orchestrated relief efforts while asserting their respective claims to legitimacy. Bihar Central Relief Committee (BCRC) served as a relief committee mainly run by local INC members, and the Viceroy's Earthquake Relief Fund (VERF) assumed a central role in collecting public charity on behalf of the colonial government. Alongside them were other actors such as international relief organizations, press and public information agencies, social service organizations, and other political parties, all of which shaped

the landscape of disaster response and relief operations. These emergency relief efforts, in turn, enabled these actors to negotiate their positions against each other and establish their political stances.

One of the book's most notable strengths is the impressive volume of archival materials that have been used to present its analysis. Key documents such as correspondence, memoranda, and reports from the Reconstruction Department and the Earthquake Branch in Patna form the core material of this research. The book also relies on collections belonging to private individuals involved in the relief efforts, drawing insights from personal letters, memoirs, and newspaper accounts. It is through the meticulous compilation and synthesis of these diverse sources that the book presents a complex and nuanced appreciation of the relief process. Throughout the book, Marcussen situates the analysis in conversation with a broad range of existing scholarship in the field of historical disaster research.

The primary contribution of the book lies in its exploration of the politics inherent in disasters. It demonstrates how issues of communication disruption swiftly replaced rescue operations as the state's primary concern, prompting a shift towards prioritizing security measures, the main theme of Chapter Two. The major part of the book is devoted to how relief efforts and rehabilitation initiatives provide a political space for the power struggles—this theme runs through Chapters Three and Four. Chapter Five turns its attention to the victims of the earthquake, especially how relief distribution shaped the victim identities—with some being seen as more “deserving” of aid than others based on the damage to their property. This meant that the middle class gained more relief support leaving other groups such as laborers and agriculturalists more marginalized as a consequence of relief efforts. The final chapter's focus on reconstruction shows that the new buildings were even more vulnerable to future earthquakes.

The key takeaway for me from this book was that the “disasters, as exogenous shocks to which a political system must respond, become inherently political in their aftermath” (p. 97). Disaster aid, relief and reconstruction efforts reflected competing political agendas. The INC occupied a pivotal position within the organizational framework of a parallel disaster administration, leveraging its existing networks and established infrastructural facilities. Congress operations served to highlight the colonial state's deficiencies and responsibilities, and philanthropy, charity, and relief work came to be practiced in the name of national interest. The colonial

government raised suspicions over these activities on several fronts—they feared that the BCRC would accrue “political capital” on behalf of the INC. They were also suspicious that the INC members, both local and external, would exploit relief efforts for political gain. This led the colonial government to accuse the BCRC of purportedly diverting relief aid to finance political activities or distributing charitable relief to secure support for the INC (p. 100).

The book makes a significant contribution to the field of historical disaster studies, and shows how viewing “natural” disasters through a historical lens allows us to gain a contextualized understanding of resilience and its implications for vulnerability in future disasters. Within a short span, the INC applied the learnings from the Bihar earthquake to respond to the Quetta earthquake of 1935. The INC utilized the perceived “success” in Bihar to openly criticize the colonial government’s relief efforts in Quetta. Within the relief activities, Bihar and Quetta emerged as arenas where authority was contested, both by the colonial state and by the growing forces of nationalism.

One aspect that I missed, however, is the examination of public response to these political interventions. This lack is glaring mainly because the book does mention that it draws upon personal correspondence and memoirs. While the book provides an excellent insight into the actions of the colonial government, political parties, local administration, the press, and charitable agencies in responding to the disaster aftermath, it offers a limited exploration of how ordinary individuals engaged in relief efforts. There is, of course, a compelling discussion on the involvement of the urban middle class in defining themselves as primary victims of the earthquake, shedding light on how relief categorizations influence people’s identities. However, I was left wanting to know more about the specific insights that the personal letters and memoirs provided on this politics of disaster response.

Similarly, although the earthquake is referred to as the Bihar-Nepal Earthquake, this book focuses solely on the response within India and does not cover the Nepali side. Author’s decision to concentrate on the Bihar intervention is likely influenced by the archives she consulted, where records were primarily oriented towards the interventions on the Indian side. These included materials from the Reconstruction Department in Patna, notably reports authored by W.B. Brett, who served as Finance Secretary to the Government of Bihar and Orissa during the earthquake. She also drew upon reports from the Geological Survey of India (GSI), the Bihar State Archives

(BSA), the National Archives of India (NAI), and online records of Bihar Legislative Council Debates and Proceedings. These archives predominantly contained a wealth of information on earthquake interventions during the colonial period. It remains unclear whether she sought out and accessed Nepal-related materials within these archives, or if such resources were available at all.

Nonetheless, this oversight feels like a missed opportunity to explore how the colonial government engaged with the neighboring country affected by the same earthquake, especially given the close relationship between the Nepali state and the colonial state. SINHAS has previously published two pieces that covered interventions from the Nepali perspective on the 1934 Bihar-Nepal Earthquake: John Whelpton's 2021 article and Yogesh Raj's 2015 Notes From the Archive. Both these pieces provide important insights into the earthquake dynamics, including the creation of categories, identification of victims, and distribution of aid by the Nepali state. A comparative perspective could have shed light on how the colonial government and the INC reacted to the earthquake in the neighboring country and whether these interventions impacted their respective positions and interactions.

Overall, *Acts of Aid* is an excellent addition to the field of historical disaster research. By appreciating the social and political factors that shape the perceptions of risk, vulnerabilities, and humanitarianism, this book shows how disasters might be experienced in our world ridden with inequalities and competing political priorities. Especially as our contemporary world grapples with multiple crises and disasters, there are many lessons to be learned from disaster responses in the 1934 Bihar-Nepal Earthquake. This book will be of great interest to people studying the history and politics of disasters, as well as those engaged in the field of South Asian studies.

References

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