

**Eleonor Marcussen**

***Acts of Aid: Politics of Relief and Reconstruction in the 1934 Bihar-Nepal Earthquake***

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Throughout the annals of history, humanity has confronted a persistent array of natural catastrophes, spanning earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, cyclones, floods and forest fires. Remarkably, despite the substantial and far-reaching impacts of these events on societies and civilisations, historical accounts of them have often been lacking. This lacuna in the historical record is rooted in a tendency among scholars to underestimate the role of natural disasters in shaping historical trajectories. Historians of South Asia in particular have taken a ‘sporadic interest in how society responded to earthquakes, or to natural disasters in general’ (p. 5). They have accorded these natural phenomena a lesser significance, considering them as incidental and less central to the unfolding of historical events compared to the conscious actions and decisions of human actors. Nonetheless, a notable transformation has occurred in the examination of disaster history in recent decades, largely driven by the establishment of environmental history as a unique and discernible field of study. In alignment with this evolving perspective is the book *Acts of Aid: Politics of Relief and Reconstruction in the 1934 Bihar-Nepal Earthquake* authored by Eleonor Marcussen. It provides a comprehensive historical account of the relief and reconstruction efforts by the colonial government following a devastating earthquake in the early twentieth century, transcending the traditional approach to disaster history.

The book begins by exploring the 1934 Bihar-Nepal earthquake’s cataclysmic impact and introduces the thought-provoking interpretation of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi saw the earthquake as a ‘divine chastisement’ for the ‘sin of untouchability’ and initiated an intellectually stimulating exchange of ideas with Rabindranath Tagore (p. 3). Their differing interpretations sparked a spirited debate, highlighting the role of diverse interpretations and ideologies in shaping responses to significant historical events. In this opening chapter, the author does a detailed exploration of the 1934 earthquake that hit the districts of Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran and Monghyr in Bihar. She highlights how earthquakes, as quintessential natural disasters, have remained relatively untouched within this framework. Her adept use of the 1934 Bihar-Nepal earthquake as a lens to investigate emergency relief within a colonial government context is a notable departure from established historiographical norms.

Chapter two provides a detailed account of the official response to the earthquake. The author skilfully draws from Brett’s report, archival sources and reports published in newspapers and periodicals to present a critical understanding of the situation. What emerges from this analysis is a fascinating

revelation regarding the 'breakdown of communication' as a veiled facet of the earthquake's aftermath (p. 52). The government's narrative placed considerable emphasis on the damage to communication networks resulting from the earthquake, as well as the difficulties in navigating the landscape of Bihar. However, the author contends that at the core of the government's concern over the breakdown of communication was not the challenge of delivering relief but the fear of losing control over government offices. This loss of control had direct implications for political authority over the people, especially at a time when political entities like the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha were vying for the people's favour. The author's exploration of 'how political space and relief measures after natural disasters can be harnessed for meeting political ends' is a valuable addition to the narrative (p. 97). However, it prompts questions about the government's decision-making in allowing INC and Bihar Congress Relief Committee to influence relief efforts and whether this was influenced by a broader political agenda.

In chapter four, the author has conducted a detailed examination regarding the inception of the Viceroy's Earthquake Relief Fund (VERF) and the central role it assumed as the primary beneficiary of charitable relief offered by the government (p. 155). He examines the intricate dynamics of how the VERF came into existence and its significance in the broader context of relief efforts during that period. Even though the VERF had important government supporters, it was officially labelled as a 'private' fund (p. 177). The author identifies a duality in the government's approach, which referred to the earthquake as the 'Indian earthquake' when appealing for funds from London but as the 'Bihar earthquake' when collecting donations from within India (p. 178). This intriguing distinction highlights the government's attempt to leverage colonial ties for international relief while portraying Bihar as a region plagued by recurrent natural disasters, creating a sense of 'otherness'. Chapter five establishes a thought-provoking link between the government's preference for the middle class and the neglect of labourers and workers in relief efforts. The author astutely suggests that the government targeted the urban middle class after the disaster, which was particularly significant because the INC was popular among this demographic. The press is noted as a vehicle for articulating the idea that labourers would not suffer material losses and that restoration efforts would ultimately benefit them. The author successfully presents evidence of unequal relief fund distribution and intentional discrimination, with a focus on the social aspects of this discrimination.

The book also brings into analysis the issue of sanitation, which was an important focus of the British government, particularly in urban areas. Hygiene and sanitary conditions were prioritised in the reconstruction programme because the government believed that the majority of deaths resulted from congestion, and therefore 'urban reconstruction' was considered more important than earthquake safety. Sanitation engineering involved constructing less

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crowded and simpler buildings, and widening roads to make movement easier. Nonetheless, it is essential to highlight that the overarching objective of urban reconstruction following the earthquake was oriented towards optimising 'sanitary conditions and trade [...] rather than earthquake safety' (p. 285).

Methodologically, the book demonstrates a strong and effective approach, successfully accomplishing its primary objective of presenting the 'earthquake as a socio-political process' within its historical framework (p. 302), but it does have one limitation. Despite the massive scale of the 1934 earthquake, there's a question about whether local folklore and tales might have preserved its memory.

Overall, the book stands as a ground-breaking work. It not only illuminates a critical historical event but also underscores the significance of disaster history to inform future policies and strategies for disaster preparedness and response. With its extensive utilisation of archival sources, reports and newspapers, the book brings a breath of fresh air to the field, both conceptually and methodologically.

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