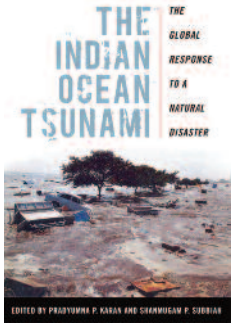


The Indian Ocean Tsunami

The Global Response to a Natural Disaster

BY PRADYUMNA KURAN AND SHANMUGAM SUBBIAH
LEXINGTON: UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY PRESS, 2011
310 PAGES, ISBN 978-0-8131-2652-4, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Greg Bankoff



Just as the twentieth century is mainly remembered as an age of “total war” and conflicts of truly global proportions, so the twenty-first seems set to become the century of mega-catastrophes: the million-death earthquake, the \$500 billion hurricane, the transcontinental pandemic. So far, none of these scenarios have come to pass, but instead, the new century has been witness to three disasters of epic proportions, even if they fall somewhat short of

the aforementioned cataclysms: the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011. This edited collection, as its title suggests, is about the first of these events, though written and published before the last of them.

Pradyumna Kuran and Shanmugam Subbiah, the editors, have compiled a volume that offers an interdisciplinary perspective that is part social commentary and part physical science treatise. As such, they seek to present a “political-ecology” approach to the study of hazard. Organized as a series of mainly multiauthored case studies of the most severely affected countries, the first seven chapters are written by geographers and geoscientists (part one) and the next six by social scientists (parts two and three). While the former proffer detailed observations on wave heights, the extent of surges, changes in soil composition, and subsequent geomorphological changes wrought upon coastal landscapes around the Indian Ocean, the latter deal with the socioeconomic impact on communities and the factors that determined their various responses to disaster and the success of the subsequent reconstruction programs. A single concluding chapter deals with aid as an arena for geopolitical competition. Despite these laudable endeavors, this is not a book that I would encourage undergraduates, let alone high school students, to read. The first half of the book, through no fault of its scholarship, is largely impenetrable to all but the most scientifically disposed. This is a shame because its message—that the tsunami caused geomorphological change that in turn has bearing on the future of coastal communities—is an important one to make.

The book has a lot going for it even if, at times, it does not quite live up to its potential. On the one hand, its multidisciplinary approach offers valuable insights into the relationship between people and their natural environment, but on the other hand it does not extend to coauthorship of chapters by physical and social scientists. The fact, too, that many of the volume’s authors are nationals of the countries most affected by the tsunami imparts a welcome perspective on the disproportionate impact of hazards on developing countries. Unfortunately, on occasion, this moral authority is somewhat eroded by anti-Western diatribes that describe albeit misplaced aid as an “abomination” that is “inexcusable and an insult to the beneficiaries” (195). Such sentiments do an injustice to those who gener-

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ously donate money and goods out of compassion for the plight of others. Finally, the volume has a comprehensive introduction but no afterword. As it is, the book comes to rather an abrupt end, with no attempt at synthesis between the physical and social sciences to draw the volume together.

These reservations aside, this is an informative book that contains much about aspects of the Indian Ocean tsunami that are not usually discussed. On the whole, its chapters are well-written, the case studies are amply illustrated with maps and photographs, and there are some “gems” among the individual contributions that are well worth encouraging students to read. ■

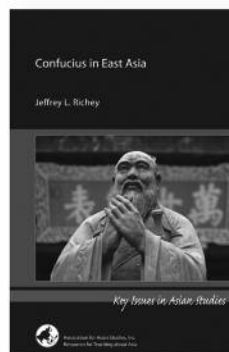
GREG BANKOFF writes on environmental-society interactions with respect to disasters, natural hazards, human-animal relations, development, resources, and community-based disaster management. He is a Professor of Modern History at the University of Hull, United Kingdom.

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