

The Neoliberal State in Disaster Management

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One month before Katrina resulted in floods in New Orleans, a similar “natural” disaster occurred in Mumbai, India, revealing common problems in both neoliberal states’ disaster management. States that minimize public safety, leaving “civil society” and the market to meet social needs, may well be ones that are deficient in safety planning and provisioning.

Economies and Geographies

My research in Mumbai occurred in partnership with an NGO that brought together organizations working with slum dwellers. This umbrella organization pressures government to provide amenities to some of Mumbai’s six million “slum”-dwelling areas. Like New Orleans, Mumbai has de-industrialized in the past two decades. The city’s textile industry has closed down under competition from the power loom sector. Central Mumbai, the former heart of the textile industry, is now characterized by informal, service employment. The recent sale of mill lands has given rise to pockets of affluence in this neighborhood and upscale apartments and shopping malls now dot the cityscape. Mumbai is also a “gateway city,” a center of financial and real estate services that link foreign and Indian corporations with the expanding Indian economy. Hence, Mumbai is a seat of high finance and real estate prices. A part of central Mumbai on the north side of the Mithi River contains the recently completed Bandra-Kurla complex, which contains the head offices of major companies.

Like New Orleans, Mumbai, too, has a vulnerable topography. Originally comprised of seven islands, land reclamations during the colonial period linked them together. It is bordered on the west by the Arabian Sea and on the east by mountains. Post-independence population increases have had to push residential construction northwards. Major traffic flows in Mumbai are from the northern suburbs to the southern financial districts. This topographic sketch explains why, when the Mithi River, the geographic divide between north and south

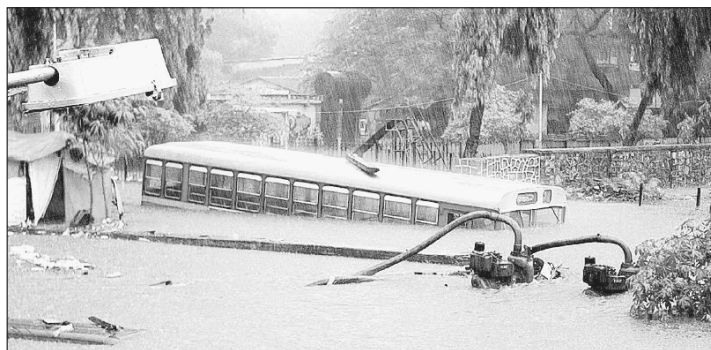
Mumbai, flooded this past July, it affected all those who commuted from the business districts to northern residential suburbs.

A City Flooded

July 26, 2005, began as just another monsoon day. The Meteorological Office predicted “heavy rainfall.” Yet a “tropical depression” lodged itself over the central-northern suburbs, and above the Mithi River. This river arises from Vihar Lake and meanders through northern suburbs until it reaches Mahim Creek. By noon, it was raining heavily. At 2:30 pm, the river began flooding and Reliance Energy shut off power because its generators were underwater. By 5 pm, most cell phone networks were non-functional, at the same time that 6.5 million commuters left south Mumbai for their journey home. Having a small transistor radio, I tuned in to an FM station to learn of the unfolding disaster. Those who still had functioning cell-phones relayed information of thousands of stranded commuters, of 12-foot-deep water and the sight of dead bodies in water. The FM stations were the only source of information that anyone had until electricity was restored. In some area, power was not restored for two weeks.

One of the most poignant stories of the flood came from the Air India colony in the Kalina neighborhood. The retaining wall bordering the colony broke and water quickly engulfed it and the nearby market. Bus passengers stranded in the market stood on the tops of buses for 8 hours. Finally, a young woman in the colony thought of using her rubber dinghy to rescue them. Several Air India employees guided all but two of the 250 stranded commuters to safety, two by two. The police arrived a day later and claimed credit for the rescue. During the first four days after the flood, few police or civic employees were seen in the major areas of flooding.

Three days after the flood, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra praised “the resilience of Mumbaikers, and urged people to get Mumbai running again.” He claimed that the flood had been impossible to predict, given the Meteorological Department’s lack of Doppler radar. The following day, the *Times of India* carried highly critical accounts the state gov-



A bus was stranded in the Air India colony in the Kalina neighborhood of Mumbai, India, from flooding this past July. Photo courtesy of Judy Whitehead

ernment inaction during the flood. They asked why it had been impossible to predict when the Konkan coast had just flooded, how could this be a sudden event when the rain continued for 14 hours, why was the chief minister meeting emergency response departments at 3 pm on July 26, and yet no warning of the flood had been given. By the end of the first week, the official death toll was 500, although many put it closer to 1,000.

Anger at official inaction was not confined to journalists or those Bollywood celebrities who filed a case of negligence against the state government a week later. On July 30 there were demonstrations of 10–15,000 in suburbs that were still without power. On July 29 the Prime Minister’s entourage was stoned outside Air India Colony. On July 31 subway trains in the Thane district were stoned. It was only after this incident that police were visible in Kalina. Thus, the “state” initially acted to repress disorder in the eyes of the public.

COMMENTARY

Neoliberal Problems

Like New Orleans, the vacuum created by state inaction was filled by the press who excelled in Mumbai in “speaking truth to power.” The *Times of India* ran numerous articles on the causes of the flood and on government inaction. Reliance Energy, the private power company that failed to restore electricity in some areas for two weeks, was severely criticized. Environmentalists argued that the Bandra-Kurla complex and various flyovers contravened zoning regula-

tions, and narrowed the Mithi River to a quarter of its original width. Like New Orleans, official reports had warned that Mumbai was a flood waiting to happen. That these reports were never acted upon was attributed to collusion between developers and government.

The *Times of India* organized flood relief when reports of bureaucratic delays surfaced the following week. It brought together companies, FM radio stations, medical staff and major NGOs. Our organization was included to set up medical clinics in slums where we had carried out research. It seems impossible that the majority of the flood-affected in a city of 15 million were covered by the activities of a few dozen NGOs. Our small research organization could only reach about 2,000.

Since economic reforms were installed in India in 1991, “good governance” has come to mean that state and municipal governments should be pared down, while social services are contracted out to non-governmental organizations. The notion of a state that relies on “civil society” to meet its social programs ignores long-term investment in infrastructure to prevent disasters and long-range planning that focuses on preparedness for the worst-case scenarios.

Comparative studies of flood management in neoliberal, social-democratic states provide important insights in resulting problems in disaster management. ▣

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