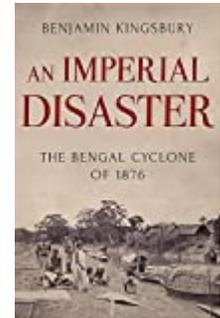




**Benjamin Kingsbury.** *An Imperial Disaster: The Bengal Cyclone of 1876.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 256 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-087609-8.



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Once upon a time, east of Calcutta—at the mouth of the Meghna River in Bengal, in the region of the Bakargarj and Noakhali—there was a booming industry of muslin manufacturing. Local fortunes were damaged by a cyclone in 1584 and weakened by the predations of pirates in the century that followed. But the area’s famous industry was only finished off by the British, whose power of taxation and industrial speed forced Indians to send their cotton to the mills of Manchester rather than weaving it at home.

By the nineteenth century, the region was becoming an ecological disaster zone. The Bakargarj mangrove forests—the Sundarbans—were being cleared, farmed by subtenants of tenants contracted to agents of absentee landlords who sent their revenue back to the British. The subtenants (and their tenants) were mainly migrants from elsewhere. They settled in a region close to the water, recently deforested. With few trees to hold the silt, the land itself became mobile.

Mobile people settled onto a mobile territory, driven by duress and the search for cheap rent. Despite the fact that the estuary sometimes saw ten-to-forty-foot tides, poor families began to build their houses on the *chars*, the silty islands formed offshore, fissile territory at the best of times. By 1820, Britain’s agents—always hungry for revenue—were driving settlement there. Locals had asked for embankments, which the government failed to provide, citing expense. When the cyclone arrived in 1876, entire villages stood under thirty feet of water.

The events that spiraled in the months after October 31, 1876, are an ecological tragedy of epic proportions. As the water receded, bodies were left behind, far more than local people could manage themselves. British observers blamed religion and caste; in any event, months passed before the corpses were removed from drinking water cisterns, by which time cholera set in, compounded by famine. The British government contemplated, but did not pursue, outright relief and restrictions on the export of grain from the region.

British observers like Richard Temple fantasized that the local population had access to hidden stores of grain, which simply did not exist. Flood, starvation, and cholera swept away hundreds of thousands of people. Their decomposing corpses created a stench. “The smell of decomposition became so strong,” Benjamin Kingsbury records, “that travellers passing along the roads had to keep their noses and mouths covered; some started running when they reached a cholera-struck village and didn’t stop until they had left it well behind” (p. 113).

The events of the cyclone give a far-off mirror to the events of Hurricane Katrina familiar to American readers: it is a saga of vulnerable communities, to whom much was promised and little delivered, set against the history of governance and funding for infrastructure, punctuated by the weather. The catastrophe was created. In official reports, the suffering—immense in countable terms—was diminished by imperial bureaucrats more eager to balance the books of their superiors than to support local populations. Temple refused a steamship for food relief, then refused another steamer that would have brought medical support and supplies to cholera-struck villages. The death toll was, as Kingsbury explains, no “natural” disaster but one that was created. Kingsbury’s problem is to trace the steps that prove who was to blame.

The story is tragic, but the narrative is gripping. It compiles a story with powerful characters, the most heroic of whom is Romesh Dutt, a young civil servant, one of only five Indians accepted to the Indian Civil Service after the reforms of 1853 which opened up competitive recruitment to non-whites. Dutt heroically compiled data on the post-cyclone tragedies that had been minimized by British administrators. While his proposals for a full system of roads, canals, and relief centers were underfunded, he organized the partial relief that he was able to provide, ensuring that the inhabitants of Dakhin Shahbazpur survived. Dutt

would go on to become one of the nineteenth-century historians of British rule most critical of the economic consequences of empire; his allegations would be substantiated by later research.

Among the most gripping aspects of this story are the microhistorical glimpses of how class and race issues intensified in the aftermath of the cyclone. At the raja of Hill Tippera’s estate in Noakhali, tenants had long resisted increases in rent; their resistance was met with a special police force, sent by the district collector to support the raja, the cost of whom was passed on to the tenants. After the cyclone, the tenants needed food and fresh water. The police intervened on their behalf with the raja’s agents, pleading for relief, but the raja ignored these requests. Relief never came, but the mandate for the special police was renewed, charged once more to the starving tenants, whose protests against rent increases eventually collapsed. “The tenants had been starved out,” Kingsbury concludes.

Kingsbury's book marks the beginnings of a new approach to environmental history, wherein the interface between climate and governance is made the focus of the narrative. We are seeing the beginnings of a genre of climate history that departs from environmental history more generally—histories of pollution, carbon, and regulation—by turning the focus on the consequences of violent storms. Domains of this kind have to be engaged through the careful consideration of social history and political economy. One recent book in this genre, Andy Horowitz's *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015* (2020), has won the Bancroft Prize. While environmental historians have been considering the social and cultural dimensions of disaster for a long time (think of social and cultural histories of the Johnstown flood, or the American Dust Bowl, or the memory and imagination of natural disaster in America), we have had fewer such histories of natural disasters, their making and meaning, for regions and times outside the modern United States. Kingsbury's book brings a welcome international supplement to this tradition.

Equally important, many social and cultural histories of environmental disaster have stopped short of tracing, as Kingsbury's book does so ably, the interface between ecology, social disaster, and bureaucracy. As Kingsbury makes clear, the ecological disasters in question were created by British systems of extraction and British bureaucracies designed to be accountable to the Crown in terms of revenue, not to the subjects of empire. This analysis, of course, has a long history in the study of British Empire, dating from the history of land revenue under Thomas Metcalf to early biological studies of the consequence of empire in the form of cholera, such as David Arnold's *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (1993) and Mark Harrison's *Public Health in British India: Anglo-Indian Preventive Medicine 1859-1914* (1994), as well as Rohan D'Souza's pioneering work on the dynamics of drought in the British Empire.[1]

Kingsbury adds to these studies a book that is a neat profile of a single tragedy, the event of a week, and its aftermath, set against the unfurling economic disaster spelled by British rule in India. Tacking between long-term economic history and short-term weather patterns, Kingsbury gives a model of how to weave together history on different scales: capitalizing on secondary sources for the long view, while driving archival sources toward the illumination of one event and its larger significance.

The book leaves a reader wanting only one further insight, and it may be the kind of insight that will come from elsewhere, for example, from the data-led histories of climate lately organized by Sam White and his collaborators in the *Palgrave Handbook of Climate History* (2018) and glanced at by Sunil Amrith's *Unruly Waters: How Mountain Rivers and Monsoons Have Shaped South Asia's History* (2018), which covers water issues in the subcontinent over two centuries. Kingsbury's account leaves the reader curious about the degree to which the Bengal cyclone was driven by climate change. Did the storm represent a new era of climate instability? Or was it merely one in a series of recurring climate disasters endemic to the region? Kingsbury leaves enticing hints, for instance, the memory of a cyclone and storm wave in 1584 that was still an object of memory as late as 1874. The narrative answers these important questions *implicitly*, but the insight might be expanded by an author willing to weigh in on the nature of environmental change in the region.

Kingsbury's book is rich on local details and voices, weaving together poetry, novels, newspapers, bureaucratic reports, and the voices of zamindars and tenants quoted in those reports. Short, pithy, and beautifully written, the book will offer undergraduates a perfect introduction to the ecological consequences of empire. I miss only slightly Kingsbury's own historiographical commentary; other historians of empire are cited in the bibliography, but the absence of a histori-

ographical section in the introduction or the conclusion means that we have few words on what Kingsbury himself believes to have been his contribution to the literature. The value of the book nonetheless remains substantial.

Note

[1]. Rohan D’Souza, “Colonialism, Capitalism and Nature: Debating the Origins of Mahanadi Delta’s Hydraulic Crisis (1803-1928),” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 13 (March 30, 2002): 1261-72.

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