

# **'Natural' Disasters and Everyday Lives**

# DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON CREATING A FAIRER SOCIETY

A fair society is one that is just, inclusive and embracing of all without any barriers to participation based on sex, sexual orientation, religion or belief, ethnicity, age, class, ability or any other social difference. One where there is access to healthcare and education, technology, justice, strong institutions, peace and security, social protection, decent work and housing. But how can research truly contribute to creating global equity and diversity without showcasing diverse voices that are underrepresented in academia or paying specific attention to the Global South?

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# 'Natural' Disasters and Everyday Lives: Floods, Climate Justice and Marginalisation in India

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For the 181 people who lost their lives during the 2022 Assam floods, 56 from the Barak Valley, and 45 of them being from Silchar.*

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## About the Author

**Suddhabrata Deb Roy** is currently a PhD Finalist at the University of Otago, New Zealand. He is the author of four books: *Social Media and Capitalism* (Daraja Press, 2021), *Singing to Liberation* (Daraja Press, 2023), *Pandemic Fissures* (Routledge, 2024) and *The Rise of the Information Technology Society in India* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). His writings have appeared in numerous journals and public forums including *Capital and Class*, *Critique*, *The Sociological Review* and *Notes from Below*, among others. This is his fifth book.

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# Preface

This book was conceptualised during the 2022 Silchar floods, when my family and I were entrapped within our house for more than a week with limited food, no mobile connectivity and electricity. The 12 days of uncertainty coupled with the visions of poverty that I saw during that fortnight form the soul of this book. This book should have been completed long ago. However, as I was working part-time while writing this book, the process of writing became a more gruelling one than what it already was. The most difficult part of the entire process was revisiting the difficult times that I had lived through during those fateful days and reimagining the catastrophic visions of human tragedy that the floods had laid bare which continue to haunt me even today.

I was finally able to successfully handover the final manuscript to Emerald in May 2024, specifically sometime during the middle of May. However, as a mentor once told me, it is always a difficult task to chase a moving target and so was the case with this book as well. Merely a day after Emerald sent me the manuscript queries for this book, Silchar was hit by another flood, albeit of a lower magnitude. It became necessary to include the 2024 data in this book because without that, this book would not have been able to demonstrate the argument that I am trying to make. Although this book largely talks about the 2022 floods, there are instances where this book takes recourse to narrating the incidents and stories of people affected by the 2024 floods as well.

The 2022 fieldwork for this book was one of the most challenging fieldwork assignments that I have ever had, largely because I had to conduct fieldwork in a time when there was no electricity, no mobile connectivity and a significant risk of being affected by the floods personally because my own house was under water for around 12 days. In 2024, however, the task was much easier. All in all, writing this book has been an eye-opener for me, because it allowed me to explore deeply into my own everyday reality: a reality of which I might not *directly* be a part of today but definitely continues to be something which has shaped me and affected my understanding of the society quite deeply.

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A book like this which speaks directly of real-life and observed experiences can never be completed without the help of others. This book also is no exception to this general rule.

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At the end, thanks to all those people who shared their stories with me, without them, this book would have never seen the light of day.

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# Introduction

Nodir fani katatarer uporbay jar ba Karimganj o. Ola jar jela nodi ee ota. Sob India Bangladesh jeno ek hoi gese!<sup>1</sup>

– A resident of Silchar, Assam, India, upon witnessing the flood waters flowing over the barbed wires that demarcate India and Bangladesh

Climate change and its associated ‘natural’ disasters are one of the defining characteristics of the contemporary world as one knows it. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN-ISDR) defines ‘Disasters’ as ‘serious disruption[s] of the functioning of a community of a society causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources’ (UN-ISDR, 2009, p. 9). The tendency of such events to occur under the contemporary developmental trajectory of free market-driven neoliberal capitalism is constantly on the rise. This is something that organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM) agree upon (Acevedo & Novta, 2017; OXFAM, 2023). Floods, in this context, pose one of the major threats to the countries of the Global South transcending borders and other differences. As a recent United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) report states:

The year 2022 was yet another reminder that Asia-Pacific is the world’s most disaster-prone region. The major disasters of 2022 fell across the development spectrum, from floods in Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Thailand, drought in China, Kiribati and Tuvalu, typhoons Megi and Nalgae in the Philippines, heatwaves in India, Japan and Pakistan to earthquakes in Afghanistan, Fiji and Indonesia. Floods were the deadliest, accounting for 74.4 per cent of disaster events in the region and 88.4 per cent of total deaths globally. (UNESCAP, 2023, p. 1)

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<sup>1</sup>Translation: ‘The River water is flowing over the barbed wire in Karimganj. The water is flowing as such the entire area is the river itself. India and Bangladesh, as if, have become one!’ [Translation by Author]

## 2 'Natural' Disasters and Everyday Lives

When 'natural' disasters occur, it is the poor and the marginalised who are at the most risk of getting affected, pushing approximately 26 million into poverty every year globally (Hillier, 2018). The poor, vulnerable, and marginalised have often been at the worst receiving ends of natural and man-made disasters which have not only endangered their lives but also their sense of belongingness within the society (Deb Roy, 2024a; Iyer, 2021). In many cases, as Sainath (1996) has noted, the marginalised have been specifically put into harm's way because of the ways in which the broader socio-economic structure is put into place conforming to sociologist Ulrich Beck's (1992) proposition that capitalist development simultaneously produces wealth and risks in a manner that makes the extremely vulnerable populace – the most likely to suffer from a disaster – further vulnerable to risks.

Capitalist development is almost always uneven in nature, an exercise that is practised to favour those in possession of the resources required to utilise the effects of the developmental trajectory in a better manner (Harvey, 2005a; Wainwright, 2013). This produces, what Mezzadri (2021) notes to be, a future akin to an Orwellian nightmare. And most people in developing nations such as India *must* wake up to the grim social and individual reality caused due to this uneven development, almost every single day of their lives making the concept of uneven development a central one for social analysts today, especially for Marxist geographers and sociologists. In India, the north-eastern region remains one of the worst examples of the uneven development which has characterised postcolonial India (Baruah, 1999; Sarma, 1966). This has, over the years, resulted in the creation of many peri-urban areas, census towns, and market towns in the region, which have remained highly underdeveloped. Urban spaces, of any kind, become the prime drivers of the problems caused by climate change under capitalism. As Mike Davis argues:

Heating and cooling the urban built environment alone is responsible for an estimated 35 to 45 percent of current carbon emissions, while urban industries and transportation contribute another 35 to 40 percent. In a sense, city life is rapidly destroying the ecological niche – Holocene climate stability – which made its evolution into complexity possible. (Davis, 2010, p. 41)

The implications of global warming and climate change manifests itself differently in different contexts. In Assam, this manifestation is largely through the lens of the annual floods. The state has seen numerous major floods since 1947, with the most prominent ones being in 1954, 1962, 1966, 1977, 1988, and 1998 (Das & Mitra, 2003). Floods, as Das and Mitra (2003) and Das (2019) argue, cause an intense destruction within the state's overall gross state domestic product (GSDP) because of the state's increasing reliance on agricultural practices to generate income for its inhabitants. They have a devastating impact on the livelihoods of the people forcing many of them to convert to low-paid professions that reduce their well-being (Das, 2019). With the coming of a situation where environmental changes have become more rapid and unpredictable, the importance of

a predictive model has also increased manifold (Baruah, 2023a; Gu et al., 2020). However, that being said, it is also critically important to consider that merely having a predictive model would not be sufficient because the gains of technological development are unevenly distributed across the globe. The politics of climate change, global warming, and environmental degradation is immensely tilted towards favouring the developed countries, because of their growing control and domination over global finance, socio-economic, and political resources (Narain, 2017). The domination that the Global North possesses creates a situation of neo-colonialism in the Global South whereby a disproportionate responsibility is put on the latter to counter climate change and global warming (Singh, 2009). At the same time, the increasing austerity measures associated with the rise of global neoliberalism are having an immensely adverse impact on the environment – all in the name of economic progress – benefitting businesses with negligible concerns for the environment (Burns & Tobin, 2017; Sainath, 1996).

The situation in India has been so volatile that an increasing number of Indian cities situated near rivers are facing higher rates of erosion and have become increasingly vulnerable to climate threats (Kumar-Rao, 2023). Nagendra and Mundoli (2023) note that with the growth of ecologically unsustainable activities, the threat of extreme events, climatic changes, and unpredictable weather processes have risen significantly, many of which do not receive the attention that they deserve from the broader political and civil society in place. In Silchar as well, such processes are visible. The growing rates of urbanisation and the increase of commercial and residential dumping into the Barak River has caused a drastic increase in the risks of flooding in the river (Nath & Ghosh, 2022).<sup>2</sup> The Barak River, because of these reasons, takes a calamitous turn during the monsoons – as shown in Fig. 1 – flooding many localities, roads, and lanes of Silchar and its neighbouring areas almost on an annual basis, as portrayed by Figs. 2 and 3.

While cities of the Global North have been debating over issues concerning climate change and global warming for years, the cities of the Global South have also taken this up in recent times in different ways (Ejaz & Najam, 2023). However, as far as the highly underdeveloped regions of the Global South are concerned, the discussion about climate change has not garnered the attention that it deserves; even though as climate activist and scholar Narain (2017) writes, these regions are important parts of the struggle against climate change. This book is about one such region. This book situates itself in Silchar, one such peri-urban town situated around 343 kilometres to the south-east of Guwahati, the capital city of the north-eastern Indian state of Assam also known as the *Gateway to the North-East*. It is the prime commercial and political centre of one of the two valleys which make up the state of Assam, the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley, with the former having 580,000 square kilometres, while the latter possesses around 6,922 square kilometres (Government of Assam, 2022a, 2022b). The second-largest urban centre in the north-east, Silchar was established by

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<sup>2</sup>See the report by Pollution Control Board of Assam at: <https://www.pcbassam.org/RRC%20Action%20Plan%20Final/priority%20V/Barak.pdf> (accessed 05.06.2024).



Fig. 1. The Barak River During the 2022 Floods. *Photo credit:* Author.

Captain Thomas Fisher of the East India Company in 1832 (Sultana, 2009) and is surrounded by rivers on three sides: Barak to its north and east, and the Ghagra to its west with the latter serving as the prime vehicle of draining the discharge flows through the natural drainage channels such as Rangirkhal, Longaikhal, Boaljurkhal, and Berakhal.<sup>3</sup>

The town of Silchar, which stands on the ruins of the Dimasa Kingdom of Assam, is populated mostly by Bengali-speaking people and was (and is) famously known as the Island of Peace since the days of Indira Gandhi, the third prime minister of India,<sup>4</sup> because of its relatively stable socio-political situation amid a more or less politically unstable north-east India. Silchar, as a town, suffers from most of the problems such as the lack of adequate drainage facilities, waste disposal systems, sanitation facilities, and water supply that most peri-urban regions of the world face (Dahiya, 2003). On normal days, these issues might seem like routine everyday matters inconsequential to the basic sustenance of human life in peri-urban regions, but during disasters such as floods, these are the issues which occupy the centre stage. The contradictions faced by people living in peri-urban regions of the underdeveloped areas become explicit during times of disasters (Davis, 1999). Floods in the

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<sup>3</sup>The word 'khal' refers to a canal in Bengali.

<sup>4</sup>For more details, see <https://www.touristlink.com/india/silchar/overview.html> (accessed 05.05.2024).



Fig. 2. Submerged Areas of Silchar During the 2022 Floods.  
*Photo credit: Author.*

region have become more disastrous considering the gradual changes which have been taking place in the region, resulting in environmental degradation which has caused a reduction in the ‘tolerance, resiliency, or recoverability of the surrounding environment and reflect a concern with the assimilative capacity of the environment to absorb human intervention or to meet increasing demands’ in the face of the complex social and physical transformations (Vlachos, 1995, p. 3) characteristic of capitalist developmental processes.

The period between the months of May and July in 2022 will be forever etched in the memory of the people of Silchar. During this period, Silchar witnessed the worst floods in 122 years (Tiwari, 2022), which ended up killing around 50 people



Fig. 3. View of Silchar Lanes During the 2022 Floods. *Photo credit:* Author.

and affecting more than a million people (District Disaster Management Authority of Cachar (DDMAC), 2022a) – *and that is only the official count*. The waves of flooding were caused by constant rainfall, which had caused the Barak River to flow at 21.59 metres, where the danger level of the river is around 19.83 metres. It is important to mention here that the highest level of the river ever recorded was in 1989, which was around 21.84 metres. Cachar receives an average annual rainfall of more than 3,000 millimetres. On 19 June 2022, the district recorded 251.20 mm – the highest in the last 10 years. Journalist Rohini Krishnamurthy (2022a) reports:

‘The first wave of the flood was managed by the administration but in the second wave, on the morning of June 20, the district

administration was thinking about handing the rescue operations over to the Army’, said Shamim Ahmed Laskar, district project officer, District Disaster Management Authority, Silchar, Cachar. The disaster levels reached L2 on June 21, requiring state intervention. L0 level is managed at the local level while the district takes over when the disaster is labelled L1. L2 would require assistance from the state government and L3 from the Centre. Flooding occurred due to the Barak river, the second-largest river in the Northeast. It originates from Nagaland and Manipur and travels for 225 kilometres along Assam before flowing into Bangladesh. The river has around 10 tributaries and five sub-tributaries. Cachar is vulnerable to flooding due to the unique geographic setting of the region, a highly potent monsoon rainfall regime, easily erodible geological formations in the upper catchments, seismic activity, accelerated rate of basin erosion, rapid channel aggradation (filling up with sediment), massive deforestation, intense land use pressure, explosive population growth especially in the flood-prone belt and ad-hoc type of temporary measures of flood control, read a 2022-2023 District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) report. (Krishnamurthy, 2022a, para 2–6)

The two waves of flooding in Assam – the first when the river water level of the Barak was around 21.46 metres from 6 April to 12 June, and the second from 13 June to 16 September with the level of the Barak river being at 21.59 metres (Government of Assam, 2022c) – with the Barak Valley suffering the most due to the second one between 19 June until around 2 July. Most public welfare institutions continue to struggle because of the long-term effects that the floods have had on them coupled with a dwindling public-funding system, as Krishnamurthy (2022b, 2022c) states in her report. It has also initiated a string of changes within the housing patterns of individuals who have been forced to change the structure of their housing arrangements to be safe from future floods, which has become a constant fear in the region whenever there are bouts of heavy showers and thunderstorms. For example, in 2024 with merely a couple of days of rainfall during late May, there arose a massive amount of shortage in the market for essential commodities such as water bottles, candles, and vegetables with many of these commodities’ prices increasing rampantly.<sup>5</sup> One of the other major reasons for the same is the dilapidated state of the roads and highways – including a sinking zone nearby the India–Bangladesh border – that lead to the city, which get regularly inundated during the monsoons and become unusable. And with railway tracks being washed away almost annually, trains

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<sup>5</sup>For example, chilies and onions went out of the market. The prices for the available stocks rose by around 200 percent. Candles usually sold for around INR 5–10 per piece had begun to be sold for around INR 15–20 per piece.

## 8 'Natural' Disasters and Everyday Lives

being cancelled,<sup>6</sup> and flight fares ranging along the lines of INR 10,000–INR 14,000 (100 GBP – 140 GBP approximately) for a one-hour flight to Kolkata or Guwahati, the developmental issues are faced acutely by the people of Silchar during the monsoons with the valley becoming completely separated from other parts of the country, as can be seen in Figs. 4 and 5 which depict two of the most critical roads for the people and economy of Silchar.

In May 2022, the Weather Channel reported:

For Assam, the 2022 pre-monsoon season has been much wetter than normal. Between March 1 and May 27, the state has collectively recorded 754.3 mm precipitation – a whopping 48 percent higher than its average for this period, which stands at 508.2 mm. The month of May has been even wetter, with Assam receiving 392.4 mm rain and effectively marking an excess of 56 percent compared to its May normal of 251.3 mm. (2022, para 2–3)

According to the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD), Assam had received 858.1 mm precipitation in June 2022 alone, which broke the 789.5 mm record of 1966 (Nandi, 2022). In Cachar, which was the hotspot of the floods, the rainfall for the month of June was a record 251.20 mm on 19 June 2022, in addition to it raining for 19 out of the preceding 25 days (DDMAC, 2022a). However, intervention from the state, as the same report stated, did not begin till 22 June 2022, but by then, almost the



Fig. 4. A Tunnel on the Silchar–Guwahati Road During the 2022 Floods.  
*Photo credit:* Author.

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<sup>6</sup>See <https://www.indiatodayne.in/assam/story/floods-disrupt-rail-and-road-communication-in-assams-barak-valley-1018903-2024-06-01> (accessed 05.06.2024).