

Acts of Aid

Acts of Aid explores the interaction between politics and natural disasters after a massive earthquake hit northern India and Nepal in 1934. While famines and to some extent flood management have been written into South Asian history, government and civil society responses to ‘natural’ disasters remain an elusive topic. This first comprehensive historical overview of the earthquake aftermath argues that its disastrous outcome was a human and historical event shaped by existing social and economic practices.

Distribution of relief—and attempts at redistribution—as well as long-term reconstruction efforts, reflected the colonial government’s political economy of aid during famines and floods. At this particular moment in history, the aftermath proved an opportunity for civil society organisations, and among them the Indian National Congress, to challenge the colonial state beyond the politics of the disaster. In the distribution of aid and attempts at changing as well as preserving established social orders, the relief process turned into a display of state-making, fuelled by nationalism and public contributions to philanthropic associations.

Focusing on the 1934 earthquake and its consequences, this book conceptualises the politics of disaster in terms of governance, civil society participation and state-making in South Asian modern history. Ultimately, it argues that efforts to implement disaster relief in various forms shaped the course of governance, state-building and the fate of communities across the region.

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Politics of Relief and Reconstruction in the 1934 Bihar–Nepal Earthquake

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