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Mapping Vulnerabilities: A Social and Political Study of Disasters in Eastern Himalayas, Region of Darjeeling

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Abstract : Disasters are perennial features of human civilization. The recurring earthquakes, floods, cyclones, among others, that result in massive loss of lives and devastation, is a grim reminder of the fact that, despite all our success stories of development, and progress in science and technology, human society is perennially at risk to disasters. The apparent threat of climate change and global warming only severe our disaster risks. Darjeeling hills, situated along Eastern Himalayan region of India, and famous for its three Ts – tea, tourism and toy-train – is also equally notorious for its disasters. The recurring landslides and earthquakes, the cyclone Aila, and the Ambootia landslides, considered as the largest landslide in Asia, are strong evidence of the vulnerability of Darjeeling hills to natural disasters. Given its geographical location along the Hindu-Kush Himalayas, the region is marked by rugged topography, geo-physically unstable structure, high-seismicity, and fragile landscape, making it prone to disasters of different kinds and magnitudes. Most of the studies on disasters in Darjeeling hills are, however, scientific and geographical in orientation that focuses on the underlying geological and physical processes to the neglect of social and political conditions. This has created a tendency among the researchers and policy-makers to endorse and promote a particular type of discourse that does not consider the social and political aspects of disasters in Darjeeling hills. Disaster, this paper argues, is a complex phenomenon, and a result of diverse factors, both physical and human. The hazards caused by the physical and geological agents, and the vulnerabilities produced and rooted in political, economic, social and cultural structures of a society, together result in disasters. In this sense, disasters are as much a result of political and economic conditions as it is of physical environment. The human aspect of disasters, therefore, compels us to address intricating social and political challenges that ultimately determine our resilience and vulnerability to disasters. Set within the above milieu, the aims of the paper are twofold: a) to provide a political and sociological account of disasters in Darjeeling hills; and, b) to identify and address the root causes of its vulnerabilities to disasters. In situating disasters in Darjeeling Hills, the paper adopts the Pressure and Release Model (PAR) that provides a theoretical insight into the study of social and political aspects of disasters, and to examine myriads of other related issues therein. The PAR model conceptualises risk as a complex combination of vulnerabilities, on the one hand, and hazards, on the other. Disasters, within the PAR framework, occur when hazards interact with vulnerabilities. The root causes of vulnerability, in turn, could be traced to social and political structures such as legal definitions of rights, gender relations, and other ideological structures and processes. In this way, the PAR model helps the present study to identify and unpack the root causes of vulnerabilities and disasters in Darjeeling hills that have largely remained neglected in dominant discourses, thereby providing a more nuanced and sociologically sensitive understanding of disasters.

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