

BOOK REVIEW

**A State of India's Environment,
A Citizens' Report
Floods, Floodplains and Environmental Myths**

By Anil Aggarwal, Neeraj Labh and V.A. Nambi
167 pp., *Figures, Appendices, Glossary*
Centre for Science and Environment,
New Delhi (1991)

The crux of the argument brought out in this volume is condensed in the sentence—"The idea that nature can be conquered and transformed according to human wishes carries with it the seed of human destruction...the onus of adaptation lies on human society and not on nature" (p. 147). This report, painstakingly compiled by Anil Aggarwal et al. from reports, newspaper items and scholarly works is exhaustive and analytical in its treatment of one of the major ecological problems of the Indo-Gangetic plains floods.

The problem of floods has always assumed a massive proportions in North and especially North-Eastern India in the States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam and Orissa. Apart from the human misery it costs, the floods have been used as political capital by our mercenary politicians and corrupt officials. Many myths have been created regarding these floods to divert the attention of the people away from the real issues. The political game has been to blame the others.

The report lays bare much of the truths behind the allegations and also brings to light the real issues involved.

One of the myths involved has been regarding the deforestation of the Himalayan regions by the hill dwellers by their rising population and jhum cultivating activities. This report clearly shows that man made activities, such as defore-

station, though they have effect on the environment have miniscule influence on floods as these are an integral part of the Himalayan ecology. Even when the Himalayan region was largely uninhabited, the inherent instability of the mountain ranges, led to gigantic floods. Further the deforestation has largely been a result of commercial exploitation and faulty governmental policies rather than any traditional activities of the people.

The authors have been analytically thorough in taking into account all the variables which affect ecology which includes social and political factors. In their keen review of the "diaras" in Bihar they have highlighted the role of caste politics, and state and police corruption in creating an ecological imbalance. The point that is highlighted is that traditional communities develop their own mode of adaptation to the environmental conditions and learn to live with its hazards. A contrasting case has been given of a comparable situation of the "diaras" in Meerut, where, in the absence of caste politics and less corruption, the situation is far more stable. People have their traditional ways of dealing with the flood situation and allotment of "diara" land. It is not the environment but its mismanagement, especially by the intervention of corruption, inequality and poverty as variables that create ecological imbalances.

Further simple environmental conservation is not the solution to environmental problems. The flooding of the sub-Himalayan regions is not a man-made but an inherently ecological problem which humans can do little to prevent. The best solution according to this work is to learn to live with the problems. In such a case environmental engineering as a solution should not be discounted although indiscreet engineering such as

building of embankments and dams can create more disaster, than prevent it. Adaptation should be mild and not drastic.

The statements, solutions and suggestions offered by the authors have been richly substantiated by documentary evidences. However, the data offered is based on secondary sources and quite often journalistic reports. Although the arguments offered by the authors make sound sense, more research data, especially collected first hand would have been more authentic.

However, this report provides both a varied

range of information and insight especially useful for persons who wish to undertake further detailed research on this topic. It would also provide useful suggestions to planners for further probing.

It is an extremely well produced document, with flawless printing and get up. The publishers should be specially commended for their efforts.

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