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***The Political Biography of an Earthquake: Aftermath and Amnesia in Gujarat, India.* By Edward Simpson. pp. 302. London, C. Hurst, 2014.**

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Review of Book

THE POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF AN EARTHQUAKE: AFTERMATH AND AMNESIA IN GUJARAT, INDIA. BY EDWARD SIMPSON. pp. 302. London, C. Hurst, 2014.

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On India's Republic Day in January 2001, a magnitude-7.7 earthquake struck the western part of the state of Gujarat. It killed an estimated 14,000 people, most of them in the coastal region of Kutch, next to the border with Pakistan. It totally destroyed 178 villages, more than 70 per cent of 165 other villages and damaged four major towns—Bhuj, Bhachau, Anjar and Rapar—seriously enough for emergency measures to be imposed on them. In Bhuj, there was an oil leak, at Kandla port highly toxic chemicals leaked into the air, while coal dust and fluorspar spilled into the intertidal waters at Navlakhi. Nine months later, partly as a result of the state government's incompetence in dealing with reconstruction after the earthquake, the chief minister resigned, and was succeeded by an unelected politician also from the Bharatiya Janata Party but hitherto virtually unknown, named Narendra Modi.

The Political Biography of an Earthquake is a study—pioneering in the Indian context—of what has happened to the devastated area since 2001. It attempts to answer the question that always arises in the aftermath of any major natural disaster: to what extent has the post-disaster reconstruction changed and even benefited the area struck by the disaster? Written after a decade of field research beginning in the 1990s (before the earthquake) by Edward Simpson, an anthropologist at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, the book provides an intimately informed and revealing picture of the workings of the so-called 'Gujarat model' of development: a phenomenon that has been much discussed in the rest of India.

Under Modi's chief ministership, Kutch has experienced a dramatic spate of industrialisation (at the same time as the controversial aftermath of the killings of Muslims during riots in eastern Gujarat in 2002), accompanied by extensive, if largely unreported, environmental degradation. According to Modi, the 'backward region' demolished by the earthquake now resembles Singapore, as celebrated in a recent publication sponsored by some leading figures of the Gujarati diaspora in London. "In the past, similar productions have contained images of temples, palaces and other cultural glories", notes Simpson. Now, "The land in which Gandhi was born and developed his ideas, the 'land of will and wisdom', has become a land of 'unstoppable growth', 'development' and smoke stacks". During the decade of his research, he observes, "the entire language of public politics in Gujarat has altered, and, in no small part, I think the destruction of the earthquake was one of the principal catalysts or 'enablers' of this shift, from the watchword 'Muslim' to those of 'development' and 'growth'". Anyone interested in the future direction of India and its economy will find considerable food for thought in *The Political Biography of an Earthquake*.

But the book is concerned almost as much with the history of Kutch as with its present and future. Earthquakes have struck the region before, probably as far back as the Indus Valley civilisation of

the third millennium BCE; they may even have been a factor in the civilisation's collapse after 1900 BCE (though this is admittedly speculative). Unfortunately, the historical record for the area is almost non-existent, with the exception of an earthquake in 1956, centred on Anjar, which attracted aid from the government of Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Rann of Kutch earthquake in 1819, which occurred at the time of the British takeover of Kutch. Indeed, in the historic town of Bhuj, during the 2001 earthquake, roughly hewn stone forming the outer layer of the bastion of the inner fortress fell away to reveal an older façade elegantly ornamented with marching elephants that dated from the pre-colonial period.

Contemporary British sources were in no doubt that the 1819 earthquake providentially assisted in the colonial development of Kutch after 1815. Simpson quotes a surgeon, James Burnes, who worked in Bhuj in the 1820s. Burnes wrote as follows in his *Sketch of the History of Kutch from its First Connexion with the British Government in India to the Conclusion of the Treaty of 1819*, published in 1829: "A violent shock of an earthquake . . . levelled . . . nearly all the walled towns in the country, and anticipated an intention, which had often been conceived, of dismantling some of these nests of discontent and treason".

In addition, however, the 1819 earthquake threw up a natural dam, known as the Allah Bund, which diverted the waters of the River Indus and caused the fertile lands of Kutch to wither. "As agricultural lands withered, the population of Kutch turned to trade, commerce and international migration for its fortune", writes Simpson, "The earthquake produced a new kind of people and society". Thus, the 1819 earthquake was an important factor in generating the Gujarati diaspora of the nineteenth century, which established the commercial reputation of Gujaratis overseas evident in today's Britain—many of whom donated handsomely to the reconstruction efforts in Kutch after the 2001 disaster through caste and temple associations, trusts, charities and political organisations, including the Visva Hindu Parishad.

This parallel between the colonial and the current development of the region is intriguing. It also reminds us—in the words of the book's subtitle—that the long-term aftermath of even the severest earthquake is amnesia. The great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 in Portugal, though much mentioned by Simpson, is a good example. The 1819 Kutch earthquake has been almost completely forgotten, even by historians. The 1956 earthquake is forgotten by all but those living in Anjar. Soon, the 2001 earthquake will be forgotten, too. As a visiting Modi pointedly told a mass meeting among the wreckage and reconstruction of Bhuj on the third anniversary of the earthquake, the rest of Gujarat had already forgotten it. By then the industrialisation of Kutch was underway. One wonders what will happen to those burgeoning industries next time the earth shakes. <andrew.robinson33@virgin.net>

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