

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

Regional Political Ecologies and Environmental Conflicts in India

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4 Riverbank Erosion and Inter-Community Relationships in Majuli

Political Implications of a Changing Landscape in Assam

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4.1 Introduction

A natural hazard is defined as any sudden environmental event that causes or has the capacity to cause damage to life or property or both. Thus, hazards by their very nature affect the material conditions of life, and as such operate at a level of political discourse (Pelling, 1999). More importantly, the impact of hazards has been shown to be proportional to vulnerability of an individual, group or society, which itself is intrinsically linked to the economic (Birkmann & Wisner, 2006) and political (Kasperson & Kasperson, 2005; Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 1999) marginalization of particular groups, and thus, depends upon the access to rights, resources and assets (Blaikie et al., 2014; Sen, 1981). The concepts of marginalization and vulnerability are therefore linked to each other in hazard studies, as the least powerful groups are most vulnerable to hazards because of their limited economic and geographical options (Collins, 2008) and are thus further marginalized to live and work in degraded landscapes and occupying hazardous environments (Robbins, 2004).

It is generally believed that in the face of a common threat from natural calamities, societies come together and conflicts are weakened. Ian Kelman (2003) considers disasters to be facilitators of diplomatic efforts to end conflicts in any region. Similarly, some more works have shown disasters to lead to the growth of altruistic or therapeutic communities (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1976) that have led to a dampening of conflicts. However, from the above discussion on the nexus between disasters, vulnerability and marginalization, it is clear that natural hazards can disrupt social equilibrium in communities by intensifying the latent vulnerabilities of the social groups. Oliver-Smith (1990) has shown how human societies are all stratified and this becomes even more pronounced during and after a disaster. Other