

Reaction Paper Jeevan Sahota

Platt in *Disasters and Democracy* has traced the historical evolution of federal government's response to disasters and emergencies. It was interesting to note how the political and economic ideology of "laissez faire" was so strong in guiding the state policy of non involvement toward worst natural disasters in the late nineteenth century running into first few decades of twentieth century. Platt's analysis of effect of first world war and great depression on US federal government policy on the increase of the vulnerability as a result of extensive investment in public infrastructure which led people to settle on hazard prone areas.

I was quite surprised to note how the urban planning and zoning laws were their infancy in US whereas European cities had elaborate city planning and zoning laws and one could visualize the urban chaos as the article reports that in 1920, there were more people in cities than in rural areas and zoning laws were rarely enforced.

The very fact that in several cases where flood control measures were implemented, the floods exceeded the design capacity and resulted in much greater damage than would have occurred in the absence of such measures again shows the extent of inefficacy of our interventions. This again forces us to re-look at the cost-benefit and effectiveness of such measures.

I tried to compare the evolution of disaster response approaches of US and India and it was very interesting to note that how disaster relief and reconstruction has been used as a tool to serve political ends by politician in power at all levels of political and government. I have personally witnessed such an incident myself in India. I happened to be present in a high level meeting chaired by the then Prime Minister of India during mid 1990s, when Prime Minister was came visiting a region which was endemic to perpetual droughts. When the officer in-charge of that district made a presentation explained how certain measures could reduce the vulnerability of population by certain measures and he made a strong case in favor of undertaking preparedness and mitigation initiatives. The Prime Minister was very much impressed with him and approved the projects. However, the Chief Minister of the state concerned was visibly unhappy at this as he was expecting several hundred million rupees in drought relief which was hundreds times more than the mitigation project costs. To cut the story short, that officer was sacked by the Chief Minister and was transferred to some insignificant post in other district.

Further, the discussion on linking enhanced federal disaster assistance leading to more risky behavior such as the development of settlements in vulnerable areas like coastal regions. However, I strongly believe that government should have enabling policies to promote disaster mitigation efforts and continue to provide relief and assistance to poor sections of society.