

# No One Had a Tongue to Speak

The Untold Story of One of History's Deadliest Floods

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Prometheus Books

59 John Glenn Drive  
Amherst, New York 14228-2119

Published 2011 by Prometheus Books

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Cover design by Jacqueline Nasso Cooke

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15 14 13 12 11 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sandesara, Utpal, 1986-

No one had a tongue to speak : the untold story of one of history's deadliest floods / by Utpal Sandesara and Tom Wooten.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-61614-431-9 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-61614-432-6 (e-book)

1. Floods—India—Morvi. 2. Floods—India—Machchhu River. 3. Disaster relief—India—Morvi. 4. Disaster victims—India—Morvi—Interviews. 5. Flood damage—India—Morvi. 6. Dam failures—India—Morvi. I. Wooten, Tom, 1986-II. Title.

HV610 1979 .M67 S26 2011

363.34'93095475—dc22

2010054590

Printed in the United States of America

Foreword

Disasters Natural  
and Unnatural

There is no better place in which to read a book about a disaster—the collapse of a massive dam in Gujarat, India, on August 11, 1979—than in Haiti less than a year after an earthquake leveled much of its capital city on January 12, 2010. These past three decades afford us, perhaps, safe purchase from which to discuss disasters natural and unnatural. The topic has generated a varied literature, from the first-person testimonial to scholarly histories, and *No One Had a Tongue to Speak* sits quite comfortably in between these genres.

So too do its young authors live between worlds shaped by disasters of one sort or another. The Asian tsunami of 2004 and Hurricane Katrina had a great impact on the shared commitment of Utpal Sandesara and Tom Wooten, who together decided early in their college studies to write a book about the rupture of the Machhu dam and its ending or upending of many lives in India—an event that occurred before they were born.

I was lucky enough to teach Sandesara during his first year at Harvard, and to serve as a mentor to him in the years since. But it's not for that reason alone that I was eager to read this book

and write its foreword. It's rather that I knew, as these young scholars embarked on this project, that it might be important not for their own intellectual development (which, well under way, was not a great concern) but rather for a world riven by disasters born of human agency.

The obvious distinction between "natural" and "unnatural" disasters, between events like the 2004 tsunami, say, and Chernobyl, is not so obvious at all upon closer inspection. The lines are never clearly drawn. When an entire city in Gujarat is destroyed by the waters once impounded by the Machhu dam, it is easy to conclude that human agency is at the root of the disaster. When a quake suddenly levels a city, it is easy to conclude that Mother Nature is at work. But few observers of Katrina in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast concluded that human agency was not involved in either the region's vulnerability or the inadequacy of relief and reconstructions.

Few observers in post-quake Haiti would submit that reconstruction will be effective without an acknowledgment of the *social* nature of disaster. The country is, alas, a living laboratory on the topic. It's fair to say that almost no country has had a greater struggle with disasters natural and unnatural, and with the fettering and unfettering of human agency, than has Haiti. Storm and fire and flood will always be with us, surely. But as we learned in Haiti in 2008, when four hurricanes lashed the country in the space of a month, it is difficult to control water when human beings have irrevocably altered the environment: deforestation had already rendered the country and its coastal populations vulnerable to the sort of suffering that ensued. For those few Haitians who failed to learn that lesson, it was brutally reiterated little over a year later when an earthquake destroyed much of the capital city and stilled perhaps a quarter of a million voices, including many well known to me, on a single day.

So although Haiti was not foremost in the minds of Sandesara and Wooten when they initiated this project, my experience here is surely why they asked me to write a foreword to their impor-

tant and arresting book. *No One Had a Tongue to Speak* is the most gripping account I've read of an unnatural disaster. I have long had reason to think about dams. In 1983, between college and medical school, I traveled for the first time to a squatter settlement in central Haiti, and it was there, twenty-seven years later, that I began to read Sandesara's and Wooten's book. That squatter settlement was formed when Haiti's largest river was dammed to build a hydroelectric dam, the people who farmed the fertile valley behind the dam were forced up into the arid hills above them. They received scant or no compensation; in fact, they didn't even receive water or electricity, the promised products of the project.

Over the years, living and working in the settlement, I became obsessed with dams—so much so that a journalist once asked me, “Do you have something against dams?” The answer was no, not at all. In fact, as I write this foreword I am among those politicking for more small hydroelectric dams in Haiti, so that its people, especially the smallholder farmers, will have power to cook and build small businesses and process or preserve their agricultural products. But I learned when still a graduate student that there was, already, a substantial literature about dams—not only their impact on those displaced, but also on the environments damaged or altered by their construction. There was even a literature about the impact of dams bursting.

The human project, it's increasingly clear, amounts to one giant messing with Mother Nature. The arrogance of some in charge of designing and implementing large infrastructure projects is laid bare by Sandesara's and Wooten's book, as it has been in studies of Chernobyl and Haiti.<sup>1</sup> But none of this hubris is of recent vintage. Students of public health know that early efforts to build a canal spanning the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, across narrow Panama, were met with failure because epidemics of mosquito-borne disease, especially malaria and yellow fever, were fanned by the project—as cholera was fanned in Europe and America by the growth of large cities.<sup>2</sup> These were (to use the

great sociologist Robert Merton's term) "unanticipated consequences of purposive social action"—the result of human agency, of choices—and spectacular as such.<sup>3</sup> But even when the link between disaster and human agency is less clear, the causes usually include poor planning or feckless administration. Mike Davis, in *Late Victorian Holocausts*, makes the point that a number of great nineteenth-century famines in India and elsewhere occurred not because monsoons struck becalmed backwaters cut off from the British Empire, but rather because of policies mandated within regions tightly and unequally tied to London.<sup>4</sup>

The Gujarat disaster is best read in this light. The destruction of the city of Morbi recounted in *No One Had a Tongue to Speak* was not a freak accident so much as an accident waiting to happen. In one sense, it was a quintessential modern disaster. In another, it joins a long and growing list with deep roots in what some would term colonial and neocolonial efforts to bring both nature and culture under the dominion of centralizing polities.

Since this is also the legitimate project of modernity—with all its hubris and hope, with its promise and peril—it would be prudent, surely, to learn lessons from the Gujarat tragedy. Sandesara and Wooten offer us that chance, and theirs will become more than just another cautionary tale. This account of the Gujarat disaster might serve as both warning and ethical guidebook for those of good will who believe in the hope and promise of sustainable, just development, those who spurn the Luddite trap that rejects all bold (and inherently risky) efforts to live better on this planet without destroying it.

There are three reasons I believe that my claim—that *No One Had a Tongue to Speak* needs to become required reading—will hold true. The first is mundane, almost pedestrian: as the planet grows more crowded, studies like this one can and should inform efforts to prevent the noxious, unanticipated consequence of purposive social action. The arc of history is clear: there will be more events of this sort, not fewer. Regardless of one's take on development (whether one be a grassroots activist or a protagonist of

grand public works), regardless of one's role (victim, critic, pawn, decision maker, obstructionist, or green-lighter), we need to admit that unanticipated consequences will affect us all. We should learn from past mistakes to prepare for unexpected and harmful events, natural and man-made. We don't have much choice on this score, not at this late date in our collective history, because we all need sanitation and food and electricity and safety—freedom from want and also the political freedoms that accompany sustainable development, as the great Amartya Sen has argued in a series of books and studies that should serve as companion volumes to this account from Gujarat.<sup>5</sup>

The second reason this book is important is a bit less obvious; it concerns claims of causality. There is no question that we still don't know enough about the lessons to be drawn from what happened in 1979 in Gujarat. But there is a great deal of dissensus regarding what caused what. This is in part because of lack of documentation, on which I comment more below, but also because disputed claims of causality follow every disaster, whether natural or unnatural. Why did Katrina cause so many deaths in a modern American city? Why were immediate responses to it considered inadequate rather than adequate? In chapter after chapter, Sandesara and Wooten lay bare the anatomies of harm, near and distal, caused by the disaster—from Ratilal Desai cradling the corpse of a drowned child in the main market to Gokaldas Parmar watching his house get swallowed up from a neighbor's roof, from District Collector A. R. Banerjee's relief efforts to Chief Minister Babubhai Patel's frustration amid cycles of accusation paralyzing the state government. Their experiences remind us that although all involved agree that something terrible happened in one region in Gujarat, at a specific time and on a certain day, not everyone agrees about what had caused it. Heavy rains? Incompetent dam operators? Engineering flaws? As the crowded planet and built environment change, as the very climate changes, such contested claims of causality will continue to swell in volume and in content, as

noted with regard to less controversial topics such as epidemic disease.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, let me note a third reason this book will endure: it offers humble documentation of a tragedy that, like so many others, was forgotten almost as soon as it happened. So many lives are extinguished on every day of every year, just as so many lives are begun. Most vital events are never registered in the first place, much less noted with respect. But there has long been a natural order of things—that the young are meant to reach old age and children are meant to bury their parents—and events such as the collapse of the Machhu Dam-II (or the Haitian earthquake or Katrina in New Orleans) disrupt the natural order of things. These need to be recorded and shared. Dave Eggers gave us a similar gift when he wrote *Zeitoun*, a book about one middle-class family's experience of Katrina. Given their resources—jobs, shelter, a solid family—they should have been OK. But because Abdulrahman Zeitoun himself fell outside of locally entrenched categories of race and religion (even as he tumbled into other emerging categories), and because Katrina followed 9/11 as national traumas, we are reminded that modern-day disasters are always social.<sup>7</sup>

So it is in this book about the collapse of a dam in Gujarat, 1979. Just as Eggers committed himself to chronicling the travails of the Zeitoun family, whose suffering would have otherwise been “undocumented,” and thus missed, so too have Sandesara and Wooten committed themselves to documenting the impact of the dam's collapse on the people of Morbi. Here is a Gujarati analog of *Zeitoun*.

It is also a social history, and explicitly one. In New Orleans, the story was mostly about race and class (and, to some extent, about religion). In Haiti, how one fared in the face of recent disasters was mostly a story of class. But in India, of course, it is about class and caste, gender and religion. Social complexities are confronted more boldly in this book than in most others. *No One Had a Tongue to Speak* would be important even if it were

a yeoman's report, even if it were an infelicitous translation of first-person accounts. But it is more than history's first draft: beautifully written, this book is suspenseful, elegiac, and haunting.

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February 2011  
Port-au-Prince, Haiti