



Scarred Communities: Psychosocial Impact of Man-made and Natural Disasters on Sri Lankan Society. Daya Somasundaram, Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, B1/I-1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area, Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044. 2014. 453 pp. Price: Rs 1250. ISBN: 978-81-321-1168-9(HB).

In the field of conflict and disaster, this year is important for a number of reasons. It marks the completion of 100 years since the start of the First World War. It is 10 years since the major Asian tsunami struck a number of countries in the world. Nowadays conflicts are destabilizing individuals and communities. More importantly, there is growing awareness of the pointlessness of the war as an approach to be used by nations. According to Howard Zinn, 'I see this (war) as the central issue of our time: how to find a substitute to war in human ingenuity, imagination, courage, sacrifice and patience' (In Horgan, *The End of War*, 2011, Mcsweeneys, USA). It is important to recognize that two major literary prizes for this year, the Nobel Prize given to Patrick Madiano (*Suspended Sentences*, 2014) and the Man Booker Prize to Richard Flanagan (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Vintage, 2014) are centred around issues of war.

There are several books, especially against the background of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, describing the human impact of wars. It is interesting that these books are not only from the aggressors side (impact on veterans), but also from the viewpoint of the affected civilian population. For example, from Afghanistan, a wide range of books have addressed the changes during the more than three decades of conflict in the

country, focusing on social life, which present a picture of massive social disorganization. Among these, in a book edited by Klein (*The Gifts of the State*, Dzanc, 2013), of narratives by young writers in the lives that they have lived and how their lives have been changed is heart-rending. From Somalia, the US-based Somali academic Said S. Samar believes the years of violence have changed the mind-set and culture of his people. Writing in 2010, he painted a picture of world gone mad: 'What is unprecedented in the new catastrophic cataclysm of Somalia's continuing civil strife concerns universal explosion of purposeless violence, a colossal mass hysteria which led to a wholesale unravelling of traditional normative values that mediated the rules of violence through time-tested sanctions of checks and balances. The consequences of this breakdown of traditional regulators of inter-clan discourse (are) patently a traumatised deranged society, in which men and women have taken to blindly falling on one another, flailing amorously, hacking away at one another, or rather indiscriminately machine-gunning everything that moves in a dazed hysteria reminiscent of a kind of mad dance that could only have been drawn from a Dostoevsky novel.... As I write, on average, in the capital city of Mogadishu, thirty to forty people are killed daily with no one knowing who targeted them or why. The killing is all! If today a stranger with a loudspeaker descended from the sky and inquired of the denizens of Mogadishu: "Why are you shooting?" the answer would undoubtedly resound back: "Because this is our way of life". No wonder Somalia is said to represent for African states a cautionary tale of where not to go' (Harper, 2012).

Several books describe the ongoing trauma of the people of Iraq. Among these, the most heart wrenching is the recent book by Blasim (*Corpse Exhibition*, Penguin, 2014). Besides the horrifying title, there are narratives like 'The killer and the compass', 'The Hole', 'The madman of the Freedom Square', 'A thousand and one knives', 'The inauspicious smile' and 'the nightmares of Carlos Fuentes'.

From India, from the Kashmir conflict some of the most evocative narratives are available. The changed social life is described by the citizens as follows: 'Every mother, sister, wife has the same experi-

ence. But we have now almost become immune, used to it, it has become a way of life. We have no idea when we leave in the morning whether we will come back alive'. (Butalia, *Speaking Peace: Women's voices from Kashmir*, 2002, Kali for Women).

The narrative literature from Sri Lanka is specially relevant to understand the impact of three decades of the ethnic conflict and the ending of hostilities in 2009. Harrison (*Still Counting the Dead: Survivors of Sri Lanka's Hidden War*, Portobello, 2012) presents the traumatic experiences of a journalist, a spokesman, doctor, nun, teacher, rebel mother, volunteer, fighter, shopkeeper and a housewife. The vivid experiences of trauma support the conclusion of author, 'after Iraq, Afghanistan, and Darfur, Sri Lanka has the highest number of casualties of any conflict in this century, yet few have heard it'. The book 'Wave' describes in the most emotive and vivid manner the destruction of the survivor of the tsunami, in which the author loses her parents and the whole family.

Daya Somasundaram has been working with the population living in the conflict situation for the last 30 years. His earlier book *Scarred Minds* (Sage, 1998) covered the psychological impact of war on Sri Lankan Tamils and 'Mental Health in the Tamil Community' (TPO, 2000).

The book under review covers a bigger canvas of the psychosocial impact of man-made and natural disasters on Sri Lankan society. It is an excellent record of 'developing knowledge of the psychosocial but also our struggles to find the best way to help, the variety of psychosocial interventions we evolved over time from our experiences, and work elsewhere in the world which were found effective. It is an attempt to share the pain and the learning, a necessary ventilation of our trauma and common humanity' (p. xxvi).

The book is organized around three disasters, namely the three decade Tamil conflict, the Vanni war and the Asian tsunami. It begins with a good introduction to the background of the conflict at the individual, local, national, regional and global levels. This is followed by a detailed chapter on the theory of collective trauma and methodology used. The impact of these events is described in the form of case narratives, observations and interventions additional experiences of

special groups of population like the combatants, the diaspora in London. The final section describes the psychosocial interventions from different perspectives. Authors present both the evolution of the interventions, their implementation, and assessment of the post-conflict work. All the chapters are richly filled with data and individual narratives, bringing to the reader the real-life experiences of the population of Sri Lanka. All the experiences are presented with both micro-level experiences of individuals/families and the macro-level issues of politics and policies at the national and international levels.

The ethical conflicts of the psychosocial interventions in conflict situations are acknowledged by the author as follows: 'counselling is an intervention that requires clients to speak about their problems. Inevitably, clients share their experiences during the war and how they survived the terrible events that struck them, their family members and friends. Stories of their losses, violence, abuses of human rights and power, alcoholism and corruption are testimonies of the experiences they underwent and the situation of the country when these took place. But Sri Lanka is "celebrating" the victory over the LTTE. Such stories could very well blacken the picture that the state wants to depict to its citizens and the international community, that of

complete power, control and euphoria, minimising the suffering of those who survived the war. However, these stories need to be heard if one wants to provide people with appropriate psychosocial care as well as address the broader need of national reconciliation' (pp. 395–396).

The unfinished agenda comes through the book: 'After the end to the bitter fighting and the horrors of civil war, it appears that we are back to where we started from, back to square one. Are we any wiser? The painful and costly experiences of the past few decades should have given us the maturity and willingness to act, to put things right. Sadly, post-war national reconciliation, recovery and development are yet to materialise' (p. 397).

The book is a vital contribution and can be a model for professionals working with psychosocial interventions in countries in conflict like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia and South Sudan. Daya Somasundaram has set very high standards of scholarship to follow.

In the larger context, a greater examination of the human cost of war and disasters is emerging. For example, Dearzen (*The Invisible Front*, Crown, 2014) describes the love and loss in an era of endless war, with the focus on suicides among veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq wars. The awareness of the community-

level impact of disasters is presented by Simpson (*The Political Biography of an Earthquake*, Oxford, 2014) who reports on the massive community-level changes following the Kutch earthquake of 2001. He describes a 'society in mourning, further alienated by manufactured conditions of uncertainty and absurdity'.

The growing unease with the war is reflected by Horgan (*The End of War*, Mcsweeney's, 2011) who summarizes the pointlessness and the horror of war as follows: 'but in the bad barrel of war, even warriors fighting for the noblest of causes almost invariably commit horrific crimes'. It will be appropriate to end this review with lines from a Vietnam war era hit song, 'War, what is it good for? Absolutely nothing'.

This book should be essential reading for all mental health professionals, politicians, planners and humanitarian personnel. It should be in all libraries of medical colleges, universities, schools of social work and voluntary organizations.

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