

Life in the Kali Yuga: Civilization as Tsunami

A natural disaster is not a moral event, but how we respond to a disaster inevitably is. If the tsunami demonstrates that the earth is not on anyone's "side," then it behooves us even more to be on the side of the earth.

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The awesome magnitude and incomprehensible physical destruction and human suffering caused by the tsunami that ravaged and rattled the earth in December render any statement about it, any explanation, painfully inadequate. Towns were demolished, villages and whole stands of trees smashed to splinters, trains swept off their tracks and bent and twisted like toys. People were swept back into the sea, crushed under rubble, pulled from each other and drowned in the flood waters, left mangled and askew in trees and power lines by the terrible waves.

Perhaps a third of the victims were children, who could not run fast enough, or who could not swim strongly enough. One witness compared it to the Apocalypse; many anguished survivors who had lost most of their families wished the wave had taken them, too. The Western media commonly described the destruction's "biblical proportions," but it was in fact far vaster, affecting people over an enormous expanse of ocean in several countries at once.

In a matter of a few hours, the tsunami killed as many as 150,000 people, and left many more with nothing but the clothing on their backs—their families swallowed up by the terrible waters, their houses and fishing boats obliterated, their means of subsistence and local economies destroyed. In terms of human mortality alone, this event was a loose equivalent of almost eighteen hundred Srebrenica massacres, seventy-five Sabra and Shatila, three hundred My Lai, numbers that can only overwhelm and confound us. In this calamity, however, it was not fascist marauders, mercenaries, or imperial troops who accomplished the carnage but Mother Nature herself, the Great Goddess Gaia, nurturer and destroyer. It was the Vedic Kali and Aztec Coatlicue, covered in blood, with their necklaces of skulls, goddesses of fertility and destruction.

The international response, as always in this age an amalgam of powerful empathy and the mediatized "pornography of suffering," was notable. It was strange and disturbing to hear the news each day and see the numbers of victims rise inexorably and dramatically. Many people gave generously to the relief organizations trying to marshal material and funds to respond, organizing spontaneous benefits and offering to help. And yet it occurred to us, as we know it did to others opposed to the current war, to ask why people share such compassion when a tragedy is "natural," and maintain such willful ignorance when devastation is planned and calculated?

Indeed, some tragedies are not random, and Kali is also a goddess of war, which has become a perpetual emergency of our time. War is a wicked tsunami for its victims. Take, for example, the willful and literally lavish destruction of Iraq, the costs of which far surpass the sum total of funds and physical material to aid the victims of the Wave. A carefully researched and peer-reviewed report in a British medical journal announced in late 2004 that Iraqi deaths due to the war and its side effects number 100,000 or more. (A conclusion that some have viciously disputed or denied.) Where were all the benefit concerts and internet-generated appeals then? War is preventable

by pathetically simple means, but a combination of pathological incentives, spiraling barbarism, and blatant denial suggests that the war, and all war, will go on.

One could argue that civilization itself is a kind of perpetual and permanent tsunami, a collective disaster wreaking havoc on the communal garden. The horrific facts of war, world poverty, and ecological destruction also convey suffering on a par with a war each day and a tsunami each week and a cycle of preventable misery without end—an ongoing tsunami of toxic death, war, and misery perpetrated by the Planetary Work-and-War Machine that few seem to notice and which they deny when they do notice it. (This includes most of us—it is almost paralyzing. Our house is on fire, and we seem to be able to save nothing.) Are there any adequate words of shock and marvel for the spectacular cataclysm of an entire species speeding towards extinction?

In his *Patterns of Contemporary Religion* (1958), Mircea Eliade observes that in Sanskrit, the word for time (*kala*) is related to the name of the goddess, as well as to the idea of something black, darkened, stained. “Time,” writes Eliade, “is black because it is irrational, hard, merciless. Those who live under the dominion of time are subject to every kind of suffering, and to be set free consists of abolition of time, in an escape from the law of change.” Thus the idea of our age (by which they obviously meant not modern times, but history itself since the rise of civilization), the Kali Yuga, or Dark Age, which Eliade describes as “the period of total confusion and utter spiritual decadence, the final stage in the completion of a cosmic cycle.”

Images of the ancient goddesses of Eurasia were linked with the spindle and thread, and by association with destiny, the passing of time; the thread measured out one’s life, and at the end, a goddess was destined to cut it. One can easily find examples in contemporary anarchist literature of the simplistic millenarian notion that we can free ourselves from time and change, but most of us know that we won’t be escaping time or change on this earth. Suffering goes with the territory. Lesser goddesses (like the Fates), triadic sisters of necessity, handled each individual’s destiny, to be sure. But only a Great Goddess can cut the thread of a whole world.

Someone asked after the tsunami, is the Earth angry? Such speculations have turned up on e-mail lists and in conversations among people most worried about the ecological holocaust.

Certainly, some natural disasters are human-caused there is now no doubt that global climate change, with its current pandemic of destructive storms, warming of the poles, and subsequent massive disruption of plant and animal life webs are all consequences of global industrialism’s mayhem. We used to consider “talking about the weather” a form of trite chitchat for when there’s nothing else to talk about; today, “talking about the weather” is a potentially political act.

And earthquakes? The desire to explain everything is a natural human inclination, but we know next to nothing about plate tectonics, except that this kind of rock and roll has been going on from the beginning, long before civilization’s poisonous experiments, and will surely go on long after life as we know it is mere sediment. Looking at the history of geological events, it should be clear that Mother Earth simply likes rough trade.

The feedback industrial capitalist civilization is bringing about with its unprecedented chemical experiments on the atmosphere, its atomic explosions underground, its colossal deforestation and eutrophication, is almost certain to be entirely negative. Starting from a holistic notion of the earth as an organism, there may even be some connection between these activities and seismic events. But apart from things we actually know to be connected, there is little evidence of such connections. We can be sure that Mother Earth uses destruction as an act of creation for her own purposes, and it is best not to get in the way. It is also best to avoid allowing ourselves to become the victims of myth any more than we succumb to ideology (because misused mythic truths inevitably degrade into false consciousness and ideology). Humane skepticism and humility about the boundaries of our knowledge about such matters seem advisable if we are to avoid becoming some version, however minor and distorted, of the very disaster we warn against.

Even more deluded and deplorable is the contemporary militant ideology (well known to the anti-authoritarian and anarchist milieu) posing as a critique of civilization that pretends to call actively for such destruction. As if cosmic upheaval had any need for cadres! At most, such logic might aspire to become a self-fulfilling prophecy; in fact, it amounts to little more than a nihilist tantrum. Indeed, why not “call” for the arrival of an extinction-dealing meteor so that planetary life can start anew, free of the contamination caused by the “human cancer,” or perhaps the “mammal cancer,” or “vertebrate cancer” that led to it?

There is a vast gulf between such a cynical death wish for humanity, on the one hand, and a reasoned primitivist social-ecological critique of civilization's pathologies—a response linked to social conscience, communal responsibility, and human solidarity—on the other. When your neighbor is suffering, what good is grandiose invective to “bring it all down?” And yet some will insist on doing just that. Like the gods, “nature” is for us a concept and discourse that can be utilized to explain, and even more importantly, to justify anything. That there is ‘even a need to make this point is itself a troubling reflection of a deepening barbarism and inhumanity in our midst.

A natural disaster is not a moral event, but how we respond to a disaster inevitably is. If the tsunami demonstrates that the earth is not on anyone's “side,” then it behooves us even more—for reasons encompassing both inherent respect for the planet and self-preservation—to be on the side of the earth. At present, most of what industrial capitalist civilization is doing is creative activity organized to serve the cause of deliberate, pointless material accumulation and material destruction. While elites administer this pandemonium, plebes participate. And yet if human beings could bring about a change in orientation, turn the mechanized phalanx back, we might find ways to avoid some terrible cataclysms, or at least be able to face them more properly and humanely when they occur.

One thing is sure—such catastrophes will continue to occur, along with the ones that are megamachine-manufactured. They will continue to damage people and places, diminishing human possibilities. Natural disasters have been known to bring down dictatorships and empires, but they can also undermine the human spirit, as they must have done in Sumatra and Sri Lanka and those other unhappy places. In such bleak circumstances, can people change, transform the world, restore the garden?

We cannot know. When things go bad, a zen monk once said to one of us, sometimes the only thing you can do is go down on your hands and knees and scrub the kitchen floor. Similarly, those of us who desire a better world can only continue to do what must be done, even if it means planting a tree on the last day of time. Let us keep working to protect wild places and beings, to build diverse low-impact communities, to defend human freedom and solidarity, because these are the right things to do whatever the outcome. We have no choice but to live in the Kali Yuga. May we do something beautiful and meaningful with the thread we have been given.

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