

THE FLOOD that devastated Bangladesh recently is vaguely attributed to irresponsible peasants who cut trees on the slopes of the Himalayas, allowing the rain to wash the soil down the valleys, silt up the rivers and burst the banks.

Similar disasters are being monitored throughout the world, from the Amazon basin to West Africa and across the Indian continent.

Until 100 years ago, tribal societies observed cultural practices which ensured an inter-generational conservation of their natural habitats. That way lay survival over evolutionary timescales.

QUOTE by Nalini Jayal, an eminent Indian environmentalist: "We need a proper land-use policy, yet the land-use board has not even bothered to meet for years. We are facing ecological disaster. These floods are a clear sign."

Why, today, are peasant societies on the Himalayan slopes cutting down the trees and jeopardising their safety and ignoring the needs of the next generation?

Why are the spindly-thin pastoralists allowing their cattle to over-graze the Sahel and turning large swathes of Africa into a desert?

Why do the landless farmers of Brazil rip up the jungle to grow food, only to watch their acres turn into dustbowls?

The answers are not to be found in the immediate needs for food, heat and shelter, but in the destruction of cultural practices which go back to the origins of colonisation by the European powers.

Ancient systems for nurturing the ecology were destroyed by the European's insistence on a transformation of land tenure. When ownership rights supplanted use rights, people were banished from their traditional

PRACTICES IMPROPER

- "Natural" disasters continue to devastate large regions of the globe. PAUL KNIGHT argues that they are man-made, and will not be banished until we come to terms with the need for an ethic of ecology that transforms property rights.

territories; the rootless poor owed no allegiance to the coercive society which impoverished their lives, or to the ecological environment in which they could not claim rights of access.

And so was created a tragedy of global proportions, which will wreak havoc against our children's children.

Yet the commentators, in trying to analyse the causes of the devastation, emphasise human greed and ignorance and the procreative proclivities of today's perpetrators, not yesterday's culture wreckers.

But rather than confront the cultural consequences of property rights, the world's "peace-makers" buy the easy way out with money. This has happened in Brazil, where the landed elites monopolise millions of acres of arable land while the peasants, the worker ants of that society, feed off the dung heaps of the big cities.

The World Bank generously donated \$400m to fund a road which was supposed to help the landless. Peasants were told they could cultivate strips of up to 100 acres along the highway that

sliced through the Amazon basin. The rain forest was uprooted in favour of melons and corn. Within two years the soil was dead; the farmers moved on in search of food, and the nutrients of what was once a primeval forest were gone forever.

THE Indian government reports that over 3m acres of forest land are lost every year. The nation spends \$250m a year on curbs and flood compensation, but little is done to enhance the access rights of peasants to the land, which is the one guarantee of effective conservation.

An area of rain forest the size of 200 football pitches is being destroyed every minute. Rather than confront the cultural roots of that fact, the world's financial institutions willingly pay money to postpone the day when nature will force us to add up the ecological balance sheet.

At the same time, no restraints are placed on the multinational corporations that denude fragile ecosystems like the Indonesian rain forests, which have been home for man and animal for millions of years. The corporations exploit for short-term profit on the basis of ownership rights that are not circumscribed by reciprocal responsibilities to man or nature.

* A useful summary of the issues appears in Brian Morris, *Deforestation in India and the Fate of Forest Tribes*, *The Ecologist*, Vol. 16, No. 6, 1986.