Globalization of disaster

The effects of disasters do not stay at the place where the disaster happened, says S.Ananthanarayanan.

Just about a year ago the world stood aghast when a disaster in Indonesia wrecked havoc on the coasts of Shri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. Shock waves from an underground earthquake traveled at the speed of a jetliner to level an expanse of coastline thousands of kilometers away.

Disaster by TCP/IP

But in a sense more pertinent to technology, E Commerce has also extended the reach of a disaster in a way not obvious some years ago. During the rains and floods in Mumbai in July, for instance, it was clear skies and fine weather in New Delhi. But the clients of a leading New Delhi bank were affected by the downpour in Mumbai in a way that persons in Mumbai itself were not.

This was because the accounting work of the New Delhi bank was carried out in a computer data centre located in Mumbai. The data centre itself was equipped with elaborate 'back-ups' and other safeguards against accidents – something the New Delhi bank had painstakingly ensured before entrusting their mission-critical work to the data centre. But the place where the diesel-generator set, the stand-by arrangement for power supply, was located turned out to be just below the safe level during the floods. And vital transactions of the Delhi Bank's were held up for three days.

BPOs and call centres

Unpredictable impediments have caused similar breakdown in other areas. Political unrest and picketing of a certain BPO in Bangalore seriously jeopardized the outsourced operations of important western country clients some weeks ago. During the recent bomb blasts in New Delhi, again, attendance was affected in call centres in nearby areas. It is understood that the cash collections of clients in the UK, which were being arranged through the call centres in Gurgaon, were affected!

The clients of the BPO and the call centres are understood to be considering shifting their business elsewhere. But the issue is really of distances having shrunk and conditions at far off places having become local concerns.

Backlash of ecology damage

So far, the worst offenders in generating greenhouse gases and other ecologically irresponsible activity has been the western world. The total gasoline fumes emitted by small populations in the west is disproportionately larger than the same offence by all the people who live in the rest of the world. But the effects of global warming are equal all

over the planet and activists have felt strongly about the injustice of the price of modern living being paid by persons who derived less of the benefits.

But E-commerce and technology are proving to be the equalizer – the west now has a greater stake in the welfare of the rest of the world. Soon other fields, medical care, monitoring of implants like pacemakers, control of vital inventory, even daily things like traffic control, may depend on data centers half a globe away. With distribution, not only of computing but also of manufacture and intellectual inputs to maintain lifestyles, the idea that the climate, physical, social or political in one's own surroundings is what counts has become irrelevant.

Technology is bringing about, noiselessly, what thinkers, politicians and NGOs have argued over. The paradigm is shifting.