

Koshi Devastation - Time for concrete action

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It was gracious of the PM to declare Kosi floods a “national calamity” after an aerial survey of the vast area reeling under the fury of Kosi. Since it suddenly changed its course after breaching its embankment in Nepal on August 18, Kosi has moved 120 km eastward, inundating huge tracks of low land in hundreds of villages across a large number of Districts in east Bihar. The Central Government has also pledged an immediate assistance of Rs.1,000 crore as well as 1.25 lakhs tonnes of food grain to Bihar Government in order to enable the state to tackle the calamity in right earnest. Going back a few decades in the history, can one imagine that the Central Government in 1956 had conceived of a plan to construct a dam on the Kosi at Barahkshetra in Nepal at an estimated cost of Rs.100 crore. Apart from controlling the flood, the dam was expected to irrigate 1.25 million hectares of land and produce 3,300 MW of electricity. The project was eventually shelved, apparently due to cost factor.

Bihar has the distinction of being the most flood affected state of the country, accounting for about 17% of the flood prone area of the country. The devastation caused by the flood need not be recounted. Even if we discount the loss of

infrastructure and crops costing thousands of crores of rupees, the tragedy affecting the lives of people and cattle can not and should not be discounted. It is not only the loss of lives, but the uprooting from home and hearth, the separation from near and dear ones, the trauma and uncertainties faced by children and students and the washing away of lifelong earning of poor families which are the tragic part of the devastation. If there is an agreement on this aspect of tragedy, we should analyse whether, if a solution is possible and available, the government should have tried that, whatever be the cost? Especially, if people know that the disaster affecting them is not natural and it could be averted if timely measures were taken.

Embankment is only a temporary solution, especially for a river that brings in a lot of silt. Scientists and hydrologists all over the world agree that flood can be controlled only if there is control of discharge. Embankments do not control the discharge. They can at best prevent water from spreading. However, if there is heavy silting (as is the case with Kosi), it puts pressure on the river's spurs and embankments. Weak embankments cannot hold uncontrolled discharge. The breach of embankment at Kusaha is no disaster. If the breach which is growing by over 200 meters a day, reaches the Bhimnagar barrage which is only 12 km away, and the barrage which crossed its estimated life span of 30 years some 22 years back, gives in, it will be a real CALAMITY. Paradoxically, when the idea of dam construction was dropped, construction of Kosi Barrage, also called Bhimnagar barrage (following an agreement between India and Nepal), with embankments below and above the barrage was taken up as a temporary measure. The effort could not take

off beyond construction and repair of embankments year after year for several reasons. One main reason was a lack of agreement between the Government of Nepal and India. Instead of going into an analysis of these reasons, it need to be appreciated that there is no international convention regulating share of water between upper and lower riparian states and therefore a bilateral agreement between two countries, where upper riparian country has obviously an upper hand, needs to be reached with lot of ground work. Somehow, this could never happen. It is estimated that in 1954, when the State had 160 kms of embankment, the flood prone area was only 2.5 million hectares. In 2002, the embankment is 3,430 kms and the flood prone area of the State has gone up to 6.88 million hectares.

It is believed that when the case of prioritization of projects was being considered by Pandit Nehru due to fund constraints, Pratap Singh Kairon turned out to be more convincing than Srikrishna Singh and therefore Bhakra Nagal Project was taken up in preference to Barahkshetra. Bihar lost its race to Punjab in becoming the granary of the country. The long term consequence of that one decision is more telling - from being among the top three states of the country in terms of per capita income and administration in the early 50s, Bihar is in the bottom of the ladder for decades. We need to examine and understand why a serious effort has not been made to address the issues. The financial losses caused due to recurring devastation, coupled with the hundreds of crores of rupees spent on embankments year after year, would easily set aside the theory of financial problem. Even though the immediate reason of the present disaster is the negative approach of Nepal Government, in that

it allowed (or encouraged?) local resistance to the repair work that was being attempted by Bihar engineers to plug the breach at Kusaha in Nepal, the relation between the two countries have been sufficiently cordial, so as not to frustrate an understanding to undertake a project that would benefit the people of both the countries.

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Of the Himalayan component of the National Perspective Plan prepared by the National Water Development Agency (NWDA), 6 river links are directly related to Bihar. These are Kosi-Mechi, Kosi-Ghagra, Chunar-Sone Barrage, Sone Dam – Southern tributaries of Ganga, Gandak-Ganga and the Brahmaputra-Ganga (Manas-Sankosh-Teesta-Ganga) link canal. As part of the project, a Multi-purpose high dam across river Kosi is proposed near the village Barahkshetra in Nepal. Besides the high dam, a barrage across Kosi river is also planned near village Chatra, 10-12 kms below the dam, to transfer water to Mechi river through the Kosi-Mechi link canal. The Barahkshetra dam, the Chatra barrage and the Kosi-Mechi link will not only control the danger of recurrent floods, they will also bring in much needed prosperity to Nepal and plains of east Bihar through irrigation and hydro-power supply.

Let the present devastation be the catalyst of the decision to undertake the projects which have been kept pending for decades. Fund should not be a problem and the reason to delay the projects any further, after having seen the untold devastations and miseries over the decades. Especially, because there is a potential to turn-around the state in just one go. The sympathy factor due to human tragedies and the backlash generated against Nepal can be leveraged to expedite a faster understanding to start the long pending projects.

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