

Kosi breaches repeatedly, governments merely fiddle

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9 Sep 2008

Since 1963, there have been repeated breaches in the Kosi's embankments, causing tremendous loss and tragedy. Yet, Bihar's governments have made little headway and argue each year as if the problems were new, says Dinesh Kumar Mishra.

9 September 2008 - Dr Jagannath Mishra, former Chief Minister of Bihar, while speaking of the flood situation in Bihar, said, "Nobody from the government has gone to Saharsa so far. If the people in Saharsa are surviving, they must be saying that we are engulfed in water since 10 days and nobody is there to think about us. This is quite worrisome. I will suggest that we must try to look after those surviving there. We must try to save them, whether by boats or a helicopter. The flood in Saharsa is not a flood, this is unprecedented....we cannot call it a flood, it is a deluge."

But wait, he was not referring to the recent floods (2008) in Bihar. He was making a speech in the Bihar Vidhan Sabha on 13 September 1984 about a similar incident that took place on 5 September 1984 near Navhatta in Saharsa district of north Bihar when the Kosi had breached its embankment at 75 kilometres south of the much talked about Bhimnagar Barrage and come out of the jacket just as it happened at Kusaha this year.

Obviously, the powers that be refuse to learn any lessons from past mistakes. Their executive wing, the Water Resources Department, is immune to any criticism and learning. The 1984 incident had uprooted nearly half a million people from their homes and engulfed 96 villages spread over seven blocks of Saharsa and Supaul districts then. They could return to their homes only after the Holi festival in March 1985.

This year, the Kosi embankment (locally called as the Eastern Afflux Bund) was breached near the Kusaha village in Nepal turning four panchayats of Nepal into a watery grave. These panchayats are Western Kusaha, Sripur, Haripur and Laukahi with a population of nearly 35,000. Counting continues about the number of villages trapped in floodwaters in Bihar. Supaul, Saharsa, Araria, Purnea, Katihar, and Khagaria had to bear the brunt of the unexpected floods.

According to official sources nearly 35 lakh people have been hit by the floods in these districts. Nearly three lakh people have been evacuated from the engulfed areas. Relief operations are reported to be picking up for the survivors and so are the rescue operations. Unless marooned people are accessed, relief operations carry little meaning. The relief that is reaching the people is not adequate as they were braving the floods for about a fortnight without any external assistance.

The blame game and mud slinging that is so common in such incidents are also in full swing. Many leaders of opposition have blamed the Bihar government for the breach. Meanwhile the government and its ministers are calling the breach a natural calamity and that the river is now trying to go to the east. It must be mentioned here that that the Kosi embankments have breached thrice on its western side and each time it was suggested that the river is trying to head west. The Kosi embankments were built in late 1950s and according to the agreement with Nepal, the

responsibility of maintaining these embankments was vested with the Bihar government. Let us glance through the earlier breaches in the Kosi embankment.

The inaugural breach was on the western embankment in Nepal in 1963 near the village Dalwa. Binodanand Jha of the Congress Party was the chief minister and the responsibility of the breach was passed on to rats and foxes that dig holes in the body of the embankments through which water seeps and the embankment fails. The other reason for the failure was that because of the bad road conditions, the boulders could not be reached to the site.

In this connection, a meeting of the Irrigation Minister of Bihar, Dip Narayan Singh, the Panchayat Minister of Nepal, Kharag Bahadur Singh and the Irrigation Minister of Nepal, Dr Nageshwar Prasad Singh was held at the Kosi Project headquarters at Birpur on 22 August, 1963. The Nepalese side offered to extend all cooperation in undertaking any longterm programme to tame the Kosi. They also indicated that should a need arise for rehabilitation of the people in a similar situation, then its responsibility should be taken by the Government of India.

Then came the breach of 1968 at five places in Jamalpur (Darbhanga). This was caused due to the highest flow of 913,000 cusecs ever recorded in the river but an enquiry held by the Chief Engineer – Floods of CWC, P N Kumra revealed that the failure was once again caused by rats and foxes. The state was under the President's Rule then.

The residents of eight villages in the Basantpur block of Supaul district had refused to be relocated outside the Kosi embankment and demanded instead a ring bundh for them and the eastern Kosi embankment formed a part of this ring. The Bhatania Approach Bundh that was constructed in 1968-69, collapsed between 10 and 19 kilometres below Bhimnagar in 1971 and many villages were washed away but eastern embankment had not breached. The Approach Bundh was constructed at a cost of Rs.3.17 lakhs but the repair cost of the same was to the tune of Rs.2.87 crores. The state was under the chief ministership of Bhola Paswan Shastri of Sanyukt Vidhayak Dal. Since the damage was done only to eight villages, the incident did not get wide publicity.

The next incident occurred in 1980 near Bahuarawa on the eastern embankment in Salkhua block of Saharsa district near 121st kilometre below Bhimnagar. The river eroded the embankment in about two kilometres reach but just after eroding, it receded very fast and did not spill on to the countryside. The state was ruled by Dr Jagannath Mishra of Congress Party then. In 1984, a tragedy as bad as Jamalpur struck the eastern embankment near Hempur village in the Navhatta block of Saharsa district, 75 kilometres below the Bhimnagar barrage. It had uprooted half a million people and had engulfed 96 villages in 7 blocks of Saharsa and Supaul districts. People could go back to their villages only after the Holi festival of 1985 when the breach got plugged. The breach

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was repaired at a cost of Rs.8.2 crores. Bindeshwari Dubey of Congress Party was the Chief Minister.

In 1991, there was a breach in the western embankment near Joginia in Nepal that led to a political crisis in Bihar and the Water Resources Minister of the state had to resign. This resignation was never accepted by Lalu Prasad Yadav who was the Chief Minister of the state then. This was a repeat performance of Bahuarawa breach where the river had receded after eroding the embankment. The repair of the embankment cost Rs.5.17 crores and a compensation of Rs.19.80 lakhs had to be paid to Nepal for temporary acquisition of the land and trees, etc.

And the Kusaha breach took place in the regime of Nitish Kumar and it will take about a year to get the complete story. Thus, virtually no party including the President's Rule can claim that it was not involved in such an accident ever. Yet, the blame game continues unabated. There is no history of these breaches being plugged before March next year.

The practicality of embanking of a heavily silt carrying river is that the embankments would breach at regular intervals as we have seen so far. The river has breached its embankment eight times in a span of just 50 years. The government will keep on raising and strengthening these embankments. This will happen irrespective of which party is ruling the state and also in full presence of administration, officials of the water resources department and the police.

After blaming Nepal for non-cooperation, an interesting argument is given by the engineers and politicians: the river has changed its course and it now wants to move to east. If that is true, why on earth were the embankments constructed along the river? Were they not meant to prevent the river from moving either east or west? How did the Water Resources Department know that the river wanted to change its course? Why did it help the river accomplish its objectives? All this can happen in our country because there is no accountability at any level. The World Commission on Dams Report (2000) had emphasised accountability as one of its primary tools and the report was rubbished by Government of India.

All this bickering notwithstanding, the people of Bihar need help from outside. Be it governmental or otherwise. Those who have lost everything that they possessed will have to start from scratch. We used to suggest earlier that people should get compensation instead of relief, but this year it must be said that they should not only get compensation but relief also. This could be any kind that will help rehabilitate them.

The worst is yet to come when the water will recede and the people will get to know how much of their land is sand cast, how much has gone under waterlogging. That is the time they will come to know that the Kharif is already lost and the chances of Rabi also may not be there as moisture in the land will not allow for ploughing operations. The Kosi floods this year have been disastrous and no explanation whatsoever can satisfy the hapless victims of the tragedy.

One is reminded of a statement of Karpoori Thakur, a former Chief Minister of Bihar, in Bihar Vidhan Sabha during the zero hour. "I am pained to say that after reminding the officers time and again, this small repair work of the embankment was not done. The result is that the embankment has breached between 75 to 78 km and almost all of Saharsa district is under a sheet of water. The

situation is horrifying there and the district administration or the engineers of the Irrigation Department have not done what they should have done in the situation. Rome was burning and Nero was playing his flute and this is what this Government is doing.” This again was a statement on the 10 September 1984.

Has anything changed ever since?

Dinesh Kumar Mishra is the Convenor of Barh Mukti Abhiyan (Freedom From Floods Campaign). He is based in Patna. He is the author of the recently released book, 'Trapped! Between the Devil & Deep Waters: The Story of Bihar's Kosi River'.