

Kosi Flooding: It Has Happened, It Is Happening And It Will Happen Again

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04 September, 2008

Countercurrents.org

Both governments and media have created myths about floods being synonymous with predictable but preventable natural disaster ignoring how misplaced governmental intervention through junk embankment science that enjoys political patronage is the real culprit. So far Kosi has breached its embankment 8 times in a span of just 50 years. As a panacea for manmade catastrophe and calamity from such manifest failures, a high dam over Kosi in Nepal is being floated by the government officials as a so called “permanent” solution, which is 60 years old proposal. The fact is assuming that the dam comes up which is quite unlikely, this solution will have a life span of not more than 37 years because of Kosi’s 5 crore 50 lakh tones of silt load annually as against embankments whose life span is 25 years.

The Kosi embankment was breached near the Kusaha village in Nepal on August 18, 2008 turning four Panchayats of Nepal: Western Kusaha, Sripur, Haripur and Laukahi with a population of nearly 35,000 in to a watery graveyard. The flood-affected districts in Bihar include Supaul, Saharsa, Araria, Purnea, Katihar, Madhepura, Khagaria and parts of Bhagalpur. Following the breach, the water is flowing through three of the some 15 old streams of the Kosi river, namely Sursar, Mirchaiya and Belhi.

Approximately 85 per cent of some 1.5 lakh cubic feet per second (cusecs) of Kosi water is flowing through the breach in the embankment. Initially, the breach was quite small-just few metres-wide- on the eastern side, 12.9 km upstream of the Bhimnagar barrage in the afternoon of August 18 now it has widened to more than two km now, destroying standing crops and flattening houses coming on its way. It is noteworthy that the embankment and the barrage were designed to resist 9.5 lakh cusecs of water flow but it could not resist the flow of water, which was about 1.44 lakh cusecs. Given the fact that the river is embanked at least 135 km downstream from the site of the breach, the water flow was compelled to go into the old Kosi streams.

The embankment repair work, which was the responsibility of India, should have been completed before June, 2008 and at least by the first week of August 2008 based on vulnerability assessment. However, the immediate concern seems to be removal of the impediments in the drainage of this water into the Kosi river at Kursela. Meanwhile, While the magnitude of death, destruction and damage is yet to ascertained properly due to the inaccessibility of the flood affected areas,

reports that require further corroboration suggest that some 80 people have died due to the floods and some 5000 people have been washed away.

Although the new Nepali Prime Minister has called the Indo-Nepal 1954 Kosi treaty that led to construction of embankments a “historic blunder”, while terming the floods as a “national calamity” Indian Prime Minister and the Bihar Chief Minister remain votaries of embankments, dams and now desilting as effective flood control measures despite the fact that the former has life span of 25 years and the latter has a life span of 37 years. As to desilting, one is yet to witness any “credible agency” present a rational and reasonable method of desilting Kosi river that brings 5 crore 50 lakh tones of silt every year after the experience of having desilted Eastern Kosi Main Canal.

A technocracy that is caught in time warp has clearly failed in its misplaced attempt to tame the river by not acknowledging that Kosi is most violent and unstable river of the world. Over the last 250 years, the Kosi River has shifted its course over 160 kilometres from east to west. Continued and sustained support for a totalitarian science of embankments has failed, not once or twice but eight times till date.

No political party both within the state and at the center can be absolved of acts of omission and commission that has brought perennial misery to North Bihar because their policy decisions have contributed to it. Having invented lame excuses umpteen times, the politicians and acolytes of all hues are now arguing that the river has changed its course and it now wants to move to east. In the absence of even an iota of accountability towards criminal neglect, the million dollar question posed by flood experts that remains unanswered is: why was the embankments constructed along the river? Weren't they supposed to prevent the river from moving either east or west? Did the Water Resources Department know that the river wanted to change its course? Is Central Water Commission relevant anymore? Why did it help the river accomplishing its objectives?

While answers to all embankment failures demonstrate the irrelevance of such structural measures, floods have hit nearly 35 lakh people. Relief operations that are underway have no meaning unless marooned people are accessed. All rescue efforts must acknowledge that the worst is yet to come because a major food, public health and waterlogging crisis is on the anvil. It is heartrending to note the indifferent manner in which flood victims are being provided uncooked food and lack of planning for shelter, fuel, fodder, medicines, hygiene etc, requires immediate self-correction. Huge percentages of flood and embankment victims are without any external assistance for more than two weeks so far. All endeavors must be both short-term as well as long term that addresses crying concerns that go beyond the exigencies of the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Embankments have breached, it's breaching and it would breach again. Law of unintended consequences is clearly at work.

Gopal Krishna was a member of the Fact Finding Team that visited flood affected parts of North Bihar in March 2008.