

Kosi floods: no lessons learnt

By: Dinesh Kumar Mishra

“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 ten 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," said Jagannath Mishra, former Chief Minister of Bihar. But he was not talking about the floods of August 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 the 5 September 1984 near Navhatta in Saharsa district of north Bihar when the Kosi had breached its embankment 75 km south of the much-talked about Bhimnagar Barrage just as it happened at Kusaha this year. Obviously, the powers-that-be refuse to learn from past mistakes and their executive wing, the Water Resources Department, is immune to any criticism. The 1984 incident had uprooted nearly half a million people from their homes and hearths and engulfed 96 villages spread over seven blocks in Saharsa and Supaul districts. They could return to their homes only after the Holi festival in March 1985.

The Kosi embankment (locally called 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 the number of villages trapped in floodwaters in Bihar continues. 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 reached, relief operations carry little meaning. The relief that is reaching the people is not adequate as they were already braving the floods for about a fortnight without any external assistance.

The blame game and mud slinging that is so common after such accidents are going on in full swing. Many leaders of opposition have blamed the Government of Bihar for the breach, while the ministers are calling the breach a natural calamity and that the river is now trying to flow eastwards. 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 flow the west. The Kosi embankments were built in the late 1950s and according to the agreement with Nepal, the responsibility of maintaining these embankments was vested in the Government of Bihar. Let us glance through the earlier breaches in the Kosi embankment.

Breaches in the past

The first breach occurred 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 collapses. The other reason mentioned for the breach was that because of bad road conditions, stones for construction could not arrive at 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, Nageshwar Prasad Singh was held at the Kosi Project headquarters at Birpur on 22 August, 1963. The Nepali side offered to extend all cooperation in undertaking any long term 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 in Darbhanga District. 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 the rats and foxes. The state was then 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 bund for them and the eastern Kosi embankment formed a part of this ring. The Bhatania Approach Bund that was constructed in 1968-69, collapsed between the 10th to 19th kilometer below Bhimnagar in 1971 and many villages were washed away but eastern embankment had not breached. The Approach Bund was constructed at a cost of Rs. 3.17 lakh but the repair cost of the same was to the tune of Rs. 2.87 crore. The state was under the chief ministership of Bholu Paswan Shastri of the 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 kilometer below Bhimnagar. The river eroded the embankment in about 2 kilometers 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 kilometer 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 was repaired at a cost of Rs. 8.2cr. Bindeshwari Dubey of the 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 his post. 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 5.17cr and a compensation of Rs. 19.80 lakh had to be paid to Nepal for the temporary acquisition of land and trees.

Time for action

The recent 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. Yet, the blame game and mud-slinging continues unabated. There is no history of these breaches being plugged before March of the next year. The practicality of embanking a silt-carrying river is that the embankments would breach at regular intervals. We have seen that the river has so far breached its embankment eight times in a span of just 50 years. The government will keep on raising and strengthening these embankments and they would retaliate in a more ferocious way. 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.

An interesting argument is given by the engineers and politicians after blaming Nepal and Nepali people of non-cooperation that the river has changed its course and it now wants to move to east. If that is true, why were the embankments constructed along the river? Were they not meant to prevent the river from deviating from its course? How did the Water Resources Department know that the river wanted to change its course? Why did it help the river accomplishing its objectives? All this can happen in India because of the lack of accountability at all levels.

All this bickering notwithstanding, the people of Bihar need help from outside. Be it governmental or otherwise. For those who have lost everything, life will have to start from scratch. We used to suggest earlier that people should get compensation instead of relief but will say this year that they should not only get compensation but relief also, in order to rehabilitate them. The worst is yet to come when the water recedes and the people will get to know how much of their land is sand cast and how much has gone under waterlogging. That is the time they will come to know that the Kharif crop is already lost and the chances of Rabi crop also may not be there as the moisture in the soil will not allow for ploughing operations, without which no agriculture will be possible. The Kosi floods this year have been disastrous and no explanation whatsoever would satisfy the hapless victims of the tragedy that will be remembered for a long time to come.

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