



**Marooned in misery**  
**Amitabh Srivastava**  
**January 16, 2009**



Far from providing relief to flood victims, the state government and centre are busy blaming each other

More than four months after the Kosi river breached its embankment and drowned large parts of Bihar, Mahendra Sharma, a casual labourer in Bihar's Supaul district, died. Worse still, the man died because he did not receive any relief from the state Government. In his death, Sharma has become a telling testimony to the kind of flood relief operation being run in Bihar's backwater districts.

Sharma had shifted to a relief camp with his family after the flood washed away their home. But they were left to fend for themselves when the camp was dismantled and they had to leave. In any other state, irrespective of political affiliations, natural calamity always brings everyone, including all government organs, together to ensure complete synergy in dispensing aid.

In the beginning, the unprecedented floods caused by the Kosi river in Bihar—described as a “catastrophe” by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and equated to a “national disaster” by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh—triggered similar textbook responses. Today, almost five months after the Kosi breached its eastern embankment on August 18 last year, acrimony and finger-pointing between the state and the Central governments continues unabated.

**Killer Kosi**

- Although more than 10 lakh people were

rescued, the Government had set up only 350 camps across five districts where no more than 4.5 lakh victims could be accommodated

- 2,399 schools out of a total of 7,480 in the five districts were damaged by floodwaters
- Officials claim that the cost of putting back the physical infrastructure in place would be close to Rs 150 crore

Worse still, closure of the relief camps during winter has left the flood victims to suffer in extreme cold conditions. Many families are putting up in makeshift bamboo and straw shelters near Gwalpara in Madhepura district.

The residents of localities like Bhawara and Singhwari of Madhepura and many others elsewhere are staying at such refuges because the floodwaters washed away their homes. Many who returned to their homes after the water receded have discovered that it has left the land swampy, making the rebuilding process difficult, if not impossible .

Many flood victims squarely blame the state authorities for abruptly closing down the relief camps. According to official records, more than 10 lakh people were rescued and the Government had set up 350 camps across the five flood-affected

districts, but these could accommodate no more than 4.5 lakh victims. The Nitish government had also made elaborate promises of providing food and shelter to the flood victims for “as long as required”. Instead, the Government seems to have washed its hands off the situation and reportedly ordered closure of the camps after providing cash support of Rs 2,250 per family, besides one quintal of foodgrains.

On face value, however, the Bihar Government has not been entirely callous. Nitish has announced a series of relief initiatives, including Rs 80 crore worth of allocations to buy books for flood-affected students and special grants for newborn babies. But the implementation at the local level has left a lot to be desired.

For instance, while the state Government allocated funds for rebuilding of hutments in many flood-affected districts, the authorities wasted more than three months in reaching out to the victims. Even those who have fortunately received government assistance for rebuilding their homes are equally crestfallen because of the inadequate relief.



While his family moved to Gujarat, Jaynarayan Choudhary of Madhepura has stayed

back to guard his broken house and waits for compensation

Although Supaul District Magistrate N. Sarvan Kumar insists that the flood victims have been taken care of, thanks to the additional compensation from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund, the basic question of providing a reasonable roof over a Kosiscarred family remains unanswered.

Saharsa Divisional Commissioner Hemchandra Sirohi claims that the relief process is in full swing. Beyond the claims, however, the Rs 2,000 assistance to each family from the Calamity Relief Fund (CRF) for rebuilding houses appears nothing but a cruel joke for those who still awaiting government assistance.

The chief minister has also sought additional financial assistance from the Centre for massive reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. To begin with, Nitish wants Rs 1 lakh for every house destroyed in floodwater. The Centre, however, has remained silent after initially granting Rs 1,010 crore for relief efforts. Meanwhile, the survivors are fighting misery on several fronts. For one, there have been a series of boat mishaps in almost all flood-affected districts because the locals are now forced to board rickety, makeshift boats to reach destinations, as the Kosi floods have washed away dozens of bridges, culverts and link roads.

Meanwhile, even months after the breach in the Kusaha embankment in Nepal that caused the flood disaster, the state Water Resources Department (WRD), which is responsible for maintaining and repairing the embankment, is yet to plug it. The writing is already on the wall with the WRD imposing a penalty of Rs 10 lakh on Vashishtha Construction Company last week, for failing to complete the pilot channel and cofferdams at Kusaha by December 15 last year. The delay, however, has cast a shadow on the repairing of the Kusaha embankment before the March 31 deadline.

Clearly, the WRD does not seem to have learnt its lessons despite apparently being guilty of the callousness and neglect that made the Kusaha breach and the subsequent flood possible in the first place.

Beyond the immediate reasons, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Kosi embankment was poorly kept, security parameters were not adhered to, and warnings were overlooked both by the state Government as well as the Centre. Sample this. In October 2007, as part of the routine repair exercise, Bihar engineers had sought construction of a 80 m-long apron of boulders across a critically positioned spur.

The Kosi High Level Committee which determines the nature of repair work and gets it executed through the state Government, allowed only one-fourth of the original proposal. As it turned out, this could not sufficiently strengthen the vulnerable spurs where the actual breach finally occurred. Even now, with the repair exercise at Kusaha running way behind schedule, the Bihar authorities need some real sock-pulling to prevent an encore. Or pray for the monsoon to fail.

**From India Today Archives**

- [Sept 19, 2008: The flood of misery](#)
- [Sept 5, 2008: Faces that bore the brunt of Kosi](#)
- [Aug 29, 2008: Rage of the river](#)