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Mr Deepak Bharti,  
Founder, Samajik Shaikshnik Vikas Kendra (SSVK)

**Samajik Shaikshnik Vikas Kendra (SSVK)** is working to empower the most downtrodden and marginalised people, especially women, in one of the India's poorest states, Bihar. Its founder Mr Deepak Bharti is a product of the great 1974 student movement, which engulfed major parts of the country, besides becoming one of the reasons for Ms Indira Gandhi to declare emergency.

No surprisingly, the follower of JP Narayan, Bharti is candid in his responses. He dissects Bihar floods with rare insight & practical wisdom. He notes embankment construction is the biggest cause of floods. Yet, they continue, reflecting the politician contractor nexus.

He has a fearless view on every issue- bureaucratic inertia, political stunts, and delays in deploying the helicopters.

#### **Read on:**

**Bihar faced severe floods in 1954, 1974, 1987 and 2004. However, the year 2007 may be the worst year. What causes regular floods in Bihar?**

The river water found enough and open space to flow till 1954, when the embankments were not constructed on the rivers. Even the mightiest of the river flow did not cause much loss to man and the property. Before 1954, rivers moved through open areas with moderate flow. The slow water enabled flow of fertile soil and made adjoining land fertile.

With the construction of embankments on the rivers, water logging and floods became recurring phenomena. The main reason of the Bihar floods is river embankments. The embankments are meant to control the floods and to ensure irrigation through sluice gates of the embankment. However, they do not control floods; instead the silt flow becomes mightier & uncontrollable as the embankments develop cracks within. Flood water brings sand with great flow, converting fertile land into waste land.

The embankment construction also offers opportunity for contractors & resultant corruption. Many contractors became MLAs and Ministers in Bihar. This is the gift of river and embankment politics in the name of flood control and irrigation.

In fact, instead of checking, the river embankments ended up in enhancing severity of flood. The data shows the construction of river embankments has furthered the enormity of floods.

**What caused the severity of 2007 floods?**

The severity of 2007 flood is due to prolonged rainfall in Bihar and Nepal, Global warming, construction of village roads without proper drainage system, non preparedness of the disaster management department and delayed response of the state government. 19 districts can not be submerged over night. Flood water spread gradually but administration was sleeping in district and state head quarters in A/C rooms.

When I was traveling in flood affected areas, I came into contact with many journalist friends including Mr. Pranav Kumar Chaudhary, special correspondent The Times of India Patna and Mr. Abhay Mohan Jha, Patna correspondent of NDTV who was located in the most affected district of Darbhanga. They also admitted local administration was doing nothing. Incidentally, till date 2 persons (flood victims) have been brutally killed by police.

**You published a report on floods, "Bihar Inside" in 2004. What were its main points?**

This report notes the river embankments and big dams are not the solution of Bihar floods. The medicine should control the disease, whereas the data since 1954 shows the floods became increasingly unmanageable after the construction of river embankments. Through adequate statistics, this report proves the worthlessness of embankments.

Well, this was the problem. What could be the possible solution for controlling floods? There is also a talk of constructing dams on Nepal originating rivers of Bihar.

A discussion is going on over the construction of dams in Nunthar, Shishapani and Barah on rivers like Kosi, Bagmati and Kamala Balan which originate from Nepal hill. They say it would control floods, increase irrigation and enhance power production.

However, we have examples of several countries including China witnessing severe destruction due to blasting of dams in earthquakes. Comparing the Bihar earthquake of 1988 with 2001 Gujarat earthquake you find, while both the quakes were of almost similar magnitude, Bihar quake caused lesser destruction due to rampant poverty. There were more huts & less concrete houses in Bihar, reducing the possibility of human & property loss.

North Bihar is an earthquake prone area. In 1998 earthquake zone was Darbhanga, which is only 60 km away from Nepal where big dams are being proposed. During 1988 earth quake Kamala River embankment gave away due to quake tremors in Madhubani District. Big dams can have several dangers. Environmentalists note if the dam develops cracks & bursts out after the quake, entire northern Bihar specially Madhubani, Darbhanga, Saharsa and Supaul district may wash out in consequent floods. Second, the bilateral relations are highly unstable in globalized world. If India's relation with China strains & China bombards the dam, it can flood away the entire area.

Presently, Maoists hold the power in Nepal. Indian Naxalites have crucial links with them. Naxalites are likely to be in hunt of exploding big dams, causing a perennial security threat.

Therefore, we need micro or small check dams instead of big dams. These dams will enhance irrigation; reduce the danger of flood besides producing power. However, political leaders lack the understanding of the issue. There is little discussion on it.

**How does the destruction this year differ from previous years? Government figures differ from the media estimate. What is the actual loss to life & property? How many districts are flood affected?**

According to govt. sources one crore & forty four lakhs people of 1958 panchayat, 7302 village, and 175 blocks of 19 districts are flood affected. Death of 217 persons and 108 animals is reported officially. 133050 houses worth 10023.37 lakhs have been damaged. Standing crop of 1.3111lakhs hectare worth 26618.89 lakhs has been affected.

However, unofficial sources claim it may be 4 times more than government figures. Death count is more than 1000. *For instance, state Govt. reported deaths of 51 persons in Darbhanga District, while Darbhanga reporter of Hindustan Dainik, Mr. satish reported 100 deaths in 18 blocks of Darbhanga District.*

*Around 125 persons were washed away as a boat capsized in Samastipur. Government figures are much lesser & not reliable. If a boat capsizes, government estimates death count on the basis of its capacity, which is ridiculous. The government ignores that even though a village boat has capacity of fifty persons, not less than 150 persons board it. It is a village boat & not some flight that you get exact estimate of the persons boarded through passenger list.*

The flood affected districts are Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi, Saharsa, East Champaran, Supaul, Darbhanga, Patna, Bhagalpur, West Champaran, Katihar, Madhubani, Samastipur, Sheohar, Nalanda, Khagaria, Gopalgang, Madhepura, Araria and Begusarai.

The bureaucracy & other government departments are not fully involved in the

flood relief work. The helicopters were also deployed quite late. Only few helicopters are deployed in entire Bihar.

**Does this indifference reflect apprehension after Gautam Goswami flood scam?**

It does reflect. The ghost of Gautam Goswami scam haunts bureaucracy. It seems they had already decided not to engage with relief work this year. However, it's a very poor practice. Instead of remaining on back foot, government servants should have made the monitoring more stringent. They needed to inculcate greater transparency in accounts. Not undertaking relief work under the fear of scam not only reflects their inhuman approach but also marks betrayal with their service.

Several persons are flooded away. In the absence of food, shelter & medicine, they are gradually perishing.

Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Modi emerged out of the 1974 movement. He is my friend & is a widely respected politician for his humanistic approach. Yet, the delay in relief work makes me regretful. He should have personally visited the villages to meet local people. In the absence of CM, Mr. Modi had all the power but Disaster Department's portfolio was with CM, therefore only when CM came back and gave green signal, relief operation could start.

About the helicopters, it seems the administration had decided much earlier not to deploy them. The helicopters were initiated much later at the loud cry of opposition. This delay is really questionable considering the government's claim that the helicopters were readily stationed at Gorakhpur.

Indeed, the apprehension of the scam delayed the deployment of helicopters, whereas there are several areas in Bihar where only air dropping can provide relief.

**Does internal tussles in state politics also cause delay in relief?**

I do not think so. I believe the delay is solely caused by the autocratic methods of the bureaucrats, who are ruling this country. They are given total authority & act on their whims & fancies. Their bungalows are not flooded, therefore they are least concerned. Some of the irresponsible IAS must be posted in flood affected villages for at least 15 days. Mr. George Fernandes, during his tenure as defence minister deputed few irresponsible IAS officers at Siachin glacier.

**Nitish Kumar was in Mauritius even as Bihar was submerged. Does it reflect good leadership?**

I am really surprised and shocked that an honest and visionary leader like Nitish Kumar could not realize the gravity of the situation. Mauritius visit could have been delayed. Bihar flood was the top priority. He not only allowed opposition to cry foul, but also let bureaucracy play freely.

We also witness political stunts during floods. Laloo Prasad lands IAF chopper at highway.

I believe it is unnecessarily being raked up as a political issue. Though Laloo Prasad acted wrong, he should not have landed the chopper at the highway; yet if at all it has landed, it is not so big an issue to be discussed. The priority should be to work for providing relief.

**How do you find the work of voluntary organisations?**

NGOs are doing good work. Around 30000 are registered in the state. However, only 100 are credible ones, doing good work. 100 NGOs and around 25 international donor agencies can not control the flood situation of entire Bihar. Yet, if government effectively cooperates, the situation can improve a lot.

Couple of days before **Radio Mirchi Patna** broadcasted my interview. I requested to post the sanctioned relief material & other resources (block wise and district wise) on disaster management web site. It would enable the NGOs located in concerned districts to directly check with the local government officials whether the relief has reached or not. It would curb duplicity and corruption in relief work & also streamline the relief work.

I also requested to post the entire foreign relief resources on disaster management web site. It would enhance coordination amongst the NGOs & ensure government accountability, besides optimizing the relief work.

I appealed to NGO and civil society actors of Bihar and other states to come forward in this difficult situation and help people. CM House Bihar is coordinating relief operation. However, inside information reveals there are strict government instructions not to entertain any honest agency or NGO, which uncovers the actual facts or criticizes the functioning of government relief operation.

**What are the immediate & long term needs of the flood victims?**

At first, they need shelter, food, safe drinking water, Boat and medicine & also require daily items including match boxes & candles. Instances of snake bite increase manifold during floods. They urgently need medicine for snake venom.

For long term needs, they require permanent shelter. Their houses have been destroyed & they have little options of livelihood. Once the water subsides, they should be provided work through schemes like food for work. Govt. should initiate discussion on flood policy for long term solution.

**Bihar faces floods almost every year. Why there has been no systematic effort to tackle floods?**

Politicians have never considered the solution for flooding away of embankments. They have never explored the various options of flood control. Government should make flood policy. It is a big challenge and a debate should be initiated with the flood affected people including researchers, thinkers, policy makers,

social engineers & journalists.

Compare with the Narmada. It also faces flood but affects very small sized villages. Though the damage is much less in Narmada basin, yet, since it involves three states, it entails louder response than required as the leaders of all these states get into action.

**You have active involvement with the social scenario of Bihar since 1974 JP Narayan movement. How Bihar administration has changed during last two decades?**

The tenure of Lalooji saw greater social awareness and social change. He had a vision. He broke the authoritarianism of bureaucracy, brought them to local buses from red light government vehicles. He was linked with local people. However, after first five years, corruption crept in the administration. After fifteen years, Nitish Kumar has initiated good administration. His government has taken several remarkable steps. However, it is really sad that the government has neglected the major issue of flood. If only the government had been careful, much of the loss could be averted.

**What is your appeal to fellow Indians?**

Flood can not be controlled overnight. It would require a strategy & sustained effort of 5-10 years. We should study the flood statistics since 1954, the loss to human lives & property. Any strategy should be based upon such research.

We need a strategic group in Delhi also, which considers wider issues including Global Warming while planning for flood control. I would appeal to all the countrymen to visit Bihar for voluntary service.

Several volunteers are pouring in also. Doctors from Chennai have visited flood affected areas of north Bihar (Kosi and Kamala region). Swiss Red Cross (SRC) is working with SSVK in worst affected block Ghanshyampur of Darbhanga. SRC is working in Madhubani and Sitamarhi district also. It would really help the victims if more such doctors from other states visit Bihar. Flood is causing & spreading several diseases & we lack medical resources.

Entire nation must come forward to help Bihar in this hour of distress. I invite NGOs of other states to come and help the people. Our organization SSVK will do volunteers support.

**What are the efforts of SSVK for controlling floods?**

We had started a movement for permanent relief from flood called "**Nadi Mukti Andolan**"

(It means river must be free from embankment, river should flow open like before 1954) but it could not gain ground due to constant hurdles posed by embankment contractors and politicians.

Nadi Mukti Andolan demands withdrawal of all embankments and free all the rivers like 1954. We undertake advocacy with researchers, policy maker and government and also train local people. SSVK makes people aware that embankment is not the permanent solution of floods but real solution is to make embankment-free rivers.

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