

High on Dam, Law on Debate

Murari Shivakoti

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For someone whose acquaintanceship with India was limited to visiting some border areas briefly and, once in a while, watching Hindi movies, it promised to be as good an initiation into a know-India exercise as any when this scribe was asked to join a team of journalists for a tour of north Bihar. The objective of the organisers - Royal Nepal Academy of Science and Technology (RONAST) and Centre for Water Resources Studies (CWRS), Patna University - was to let Nepali journalists see and study Bihar with a focus on water resources, particularly the Kosi river basin, as much as a week-long visit would allow.

After the interactions with diverse people - from those at the upper echelons of Bihar's officialdom to the common man - that the trip allowed, one is left in no doubt that if there is one all-prevailing thing that inextricably links Nepal and Bihar it is the waters of Kosi, if one doesn't count, from our angle, the ubiquitous, peripatetic Bihari vendors dragging vegetable-laden bicycles here.

The recently-resumed Patna-Kathmandu flight also links the two, bringing the Bihari capital to only an hour away. The oven that the dry Patna of late April felt like was where the seven-member Nepali journalists group would start the interactions with the elites of Bihar. The cooler-room weather and bottles of Thumbs Up provided more pleasant settings for the meetings with water resources officials and the intellectuals. The latter turned out to be "so-called".

River of Sorrow

Discussions would naturally focus on Kosi River, the sorrow of Bihar and Nepal, and all the attendant issues of flood control and irrigation and the Kosi barrage and the embankments. What transpired at these interactions were most revealing. Crystal-clear became the single-truck on which the Bihari water bureaucracy and the large part of the academia chugged on, with condescension to consideration, even purely academic, of anything to the left or right unthinkable.

Construction of Kosi high dam in Barahchhetra, Nepal, is necessary, concurred all of Bihari officialdom and most of the so-called intellectuals. To hear them was to be flabbergasted at the blind opinion that the proposed 269-metre-high dam would be a panacea that would put an end to all the fears of future devastating floods of Kosi. Clearly, "no-option" thinking dogs not only the Arun-III proponents here but those water experts in Bihar and, of course, Delhi who seem bent on the dam, exhibiting a curious indifference to an intelligent thinking based on a scientific temper and basin realities.

Some of the facts about the Kosi Project, including the barrage at Hanumannagar are irrefutable. The 730-km long Kosi, a devilishly wayward river that has shifted westward in north Bihar by more than 115 kilometres in the last 125 years, carries the largest sediment load among the rivers of the world. Consequently, at some points the riverbed has risen to dangerous levels, up to 12 feet compared to the areas outside embankments. Surface irrigation through a network of canals has also failed partly because of excessive siltation. The Kosi barrage, completed in 1963, was built

only for 25 years as a temporary solution to the flood problem, and experts agree it has outlived its utility. And though the embankments were originally built to withstand 900,000 cusecs of flood discharge, a mere 300,000 cusecs of discharge gives engineers sleepless nights, because many points are regarded as ripe for breaches. Superintendent Engineer M. Sharma, incharge of the barrage and some sections of the embankments in its immediate vicinity, feels that certain points of the embankments are quite vulnerable and give a lot of worries.

What would give Sharma and his colleagues peace? Nothing other than a giant dam in Barahchhetra, goes the refrain among officials from Patna to Hanumannagar. The minds seemed set that afforestation and construction of dams in Nepal to provide ample silt storage and a space for moderating maximum flood and embankments in Bihar would reduce flood incidence.

Chorus for High Dam

The chorus for the high dam, it seems, is mainly pegged to a myth of Himalayan proportion that has grown over the decades: Deforestation in Nepal has caused the floods in the north Bihar plains because it causes silt depositions on the riverbed. (85% of Kosi catchment is in Nepal and 15% in India). However, it is now acknowledged in scientific circles that compared to natural erosion, soil run-off prompted by deforestation amounts to an insignificant amount. In other words, soil erosion in the Himalayan catchment is something one is helpless about to a large measure.

What also seems to have been ignored by the officials and academics the team met is looking beyond the eventuality of the high dam too getting silted up, as the high siltation rates in Kosi is certain. The facetious remark from Sharma- "We will build more dams, ha!" - perhaps gives an insight into the official thought processes at work.

What about the concern over seismicity? No worry. While building the dam "the seismic factor will be taken care of by our engineers", says Dr. L. N. Ram, Head of Department of Geography, Patna University, nonchalantly, as an apologist for the official line, the tone implying that it should not be a great concern.

Listening to the views of both the officials and the "intellectuals", it was not difficult to see that blinders, results of myths and uninformed, misplaced Bihari interests, were firmly in place. No wonder that there was little appreciation let alone admission, of the fact that embankments had largely failed as a protection measure. Independent Indian reports have noted that the flood prone area in the north Bihar plains has gone up over one-and-a half times since 1954.

Convinced that the Kosi high dam was the one and only solution to north Bihar's woes, Bihari officials apparently could not be bothered to think of any alternatives - an alternative like Sunkosi-Kamala diversion which, the RONAST academic team feels, is able to lop off the peak in the Kosi flood during the monsoon and make Kamala a perennial river. This inter-basin transfer, it feels, is smaller and more easy to finance than the high dam.

Also not under much discussion is alternative like dredging up old channels of Kosi bed so that the discharge is distributed. Or the alternatives like - perish the thought! - simply living with the floods, learning from the humanity's past experience of failed flood control measures - from dams to

embankments - and going for flood management rather than flood control. One had the feeling that the whole of Bihar water officialdom and the academia (except a few courageous souls) had no inclination to even give a cursory attention to the alternatives.

People's Dialogue

Some 300 kilometres away from Patna, in Saharsa town, local people seem more open to debate and alternatives. Ranjeev, an activist with Kosi Consortium, a grouping of NGOs that highlight the interests of Kosi-affected Bihari people is one of those who subscribe to the belief that the chief *raison d'être* for a dam is simply power-generation and irrigation, not floods, and that any discussion on the Kosi high dam must also consider the fact that people in several Nepali districts would get displaced. Also to be considered, according to him is the fact that the proposed dam area records between 200 to 250 tremors every year. He wonders why dredging up old channels for use should not be actively considered.

"On the basis of the information we have available, it is premature to pitch for Kosi high dam," Ranjeev says. "No decision should be made without a dialogue among the people. We have seen how the Kosi project has failed. People, not the officials, must decide what is good for the suffering people."

Visiting Sukhipatti, in Supaul district, near Saharsa, was a stark reality that Biharis are suffering and suffering badly. Some one million people live within the embankment. Every monsoon, they run out of the embankment and come back when the Kosi fury has subsided. Biharis also suffer because the network of irrigation canals, an offshoot of the Kosi project, actually worsen the floods, instead of providing their intended benefits.

Whether their plight would prompt a genuine concern among the officials and not only what looks like a simplistic let's-build-a-Kosi-high-dam response remains to be seen. A genuine concern would be a realisation first that Kosi project has been a failure in Bihar and that Nepal too has found the project on the whole unsatisfactory, with only a fifth of the promised cusecs of water flowing in the western irrigation canal, putting vast tracts of Nepali land under water during the spate, and being able to receive only a small part of the promised MW of electricity from Kataiya hydel plant.

An open dialogue among the north Bihari people themselves and with Nepal may help Bihar to have a better perspective on the whole Kosi issue, and indeed, other water resources issues. So far, this sure doesn't seem to be happening. While the unholy politician-engineers-contractors nexus makes it hard for the common Bihari masses' interests represented in the scheme of things. Bihar state machinery does not seem to have made any great effort to maintain a communication channel with Nepal.

Frustration

Indeed, the current discussions between Nepal and India on an inception report for studies on a Kosi high dam proposal illustrates the point. Nepal sent an amended inception report, for which the procedures started way back in 1992 February, to India last September. In a meeting with the Nepali journalists, B. P. Sinha, Engineer-in-Chief at the Water Resources Department, Bihar, S. N.

Sinha, Chief Engineer, Planning and monitoring, Ganga Flood Control Commission, and their colleagues said they were still awaiting the report from Nepal.

The most plausible explanation would be that the report is in Delhi and Bihar has not been informed of it. This lends credence to the frustration of some Bihar academics, if not the officials, who feel that, in the cut and thrust of Nepal-India water politics, Bihar is often left out of the picture, and that it is not consulted enough before Delhi takes up Bihar water resources issues with Nepal, though it is the most affected region. They would like to be more involved when Central Water Commission, Delhi, talks with Nepali officials and have less of the circuitous Delhi detour for communication with Nepal.

For Nepal, too, there are obvious benefits in having a communication line open with Bihar, something that has not figured in the priority of our water resources mandarins. Not only in matters of water resources, but in a host of other mutual issues, it should be only right to listen and talk to Biharis too than have table-talks exclusively with Delhi desk hands. Bihar, with all that it shares with Nepal, including poverty, should not take much convincing to appreciate Nepal's position regarding common issues, if both make an effort to reach out to each other.

But, so far, Nepal and Bihar have done almost nothing to understand each other, except acknowledge each other's existence through the medium of Delhi. Here, a cliché it may sound, but people-to-people contacts are essential. Government functionaries and self-appointed intellectuals may or may not understand each other as contacts develop, but peoples of Bihar and Nepal can surely be trusted to share each other's legitimate concerns and exert pressure on the former for right decisions and actions, through informal alliances and public forum lobbies.

Bhai-Bhai Exercise

One wonders whether the high-profile B. P. Koirala Foundation and other similar organisations can take up the task to enhance Nepali-Bihari bhai-bhai exercise in the larger scheme of promoting Nepal-India understanding. Such bhai-bhai interactions would ensure that debates on common issues that affect the peoples, like the Kosi Project and the proposed Kosi high dam, are also conducted at the common man's level in the affected regions of Nepal and Bihar, and not only at the ivory toweresque, formal environs of official chambers in Delhi and Kathmandu. As stressed by the Patna Initiative - a process set off by RONAST and CWRS to bring together scientists and academicians on cooperative development of Indo-Nepal water resources - Nepal and Bihar must seriously mull over jointly developing the basin areas in totality rather than continue with piecemeal project-centric planning.

Until Bihar and Nepal come together officially and unofficially, and engage in direct dialogues on common issues, it would be that extra hard to give life to the good wishes inscribed on the back of the pedestal of B. P. Koirala's statue in Patna. The inscription, signed by Laloo Prasad (Bihar Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav), reads: Bharat, Nepal Maitri Amar Rahe (Long live India-Nepal friendship).