

Comment on
“Whose Breach Was It?
Disaster and Development Experience through Embankment Years?”

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The increasing frequency and severity of natural and technological disasters in the developing world place them in the centre of debates on human-environment relations and issues of development and sustainability (Oliver Smith 1996). Natural disasters like floods, drought, earthquakes, landslides, wildfires, tsunami, volcanic eruptions, and cyclones create a sudden and shocking impact on the inhabitants of a particular area causing severe multi faceted impoverishments. To prevent flood disaster, Govt. usually undertakes development strategy (like barrage and embankment creation) along the river. A wide range of dynamics from governance to social political issues may emerge. From this perspective, this study provides important contribution in development caused disaster research.

It is argued that a disaster creates contexts in which power structures and arrangements are more clearly perceived and confronted which change political consciousness, shape individual actions, and consolidate or break institutional arrangements (Oliver Smith 1996). It can create new opportunities to reorganize power structure; it also fosters the entry of new groups into the political or economic processes, which promotes change and evokes or mobilizes resistance. The paper under discussion is largely analyzed from this framework. The question of governance and its distortions has also been discussed.

This paper tries to navigate on the discourses of disaster and development around Kosi river in India since pre independence period. It also describes how the Government rationalizes the development of the Kosi region through dam creation which was one of the main agenda of the ruling party after independence. Perhaps the most interesting part of this paper is the politics of dam creation and associated corruption during the construction and maintenance of barrage and embankment. It clearly shows that how funds are channelised and distributed among the local agents (who are usually village head) as patronage to consolidate political influence in that area. This sort of act continues for mainly electoral gains. M K Jha has rightly pointed that the process is not static rather dynamic in nature as other political developments can influence political outcome with time as observed in political mobilization of the Mandal Commission Report. An ethnographic study can be useful to capture the dynamics of political process in changed scenario which is lacking.

Construction of embankment along the river creates divergent interests groups among the affected people. This often leads to resistance from a group of most affected people. Political leaders, policy makers use this opportunity to rationalize their intention. To validate their arguments, they often use the so called ‘expert knowledge’ from Governmental institutions over issues raised by the affected people. The present paper captures this dynamics on the issue of embankment of Kosi River. Studies have shown that there is a wide variation between ‘expert knowledge’ and knowledge acquired by villagers about local situations commonly known as ‘indigenous knowledge system’. It would be fruitful if study explores indigenous

knowledge about nature of flood and adjustment with the sudden event. The study also shows that how caste politics plays an important role in the process of alignment and realignments of embankment along the river. Here also dominant higher castes like the Brahmin of Bangaon village are successful to locate the embankment outside their village as they played a decisive role in the electoral arithmetic of the local assembly constituency. Role of dominant castes in the village for manipulating development initiative is well known. But how the poor marginalized electorates see the whole process is also important. This study fails to capture the narratives of this voice less, marginalized people.

The strategy of using Govt. sponsored institutions scientific investigation by the politicians for their own ambition often met with opposite results. Experience of affected people differs as against the claims of Governmental agencies. The affected people in embankment areas of the Koshi region are no exception. Similar result is also found in case of Bhakra dam project in 1963. In fact, as a part of nationalistic euphoria and idealism of nation building, improvement of irrigation facilities through large dam creation has become the priority for achieving self sufficiency in food grain production for policy makers, politicians, bureaucrats. A study report prepared by Manthan Adhyayan Kendra, a NGO reported huge distortions as against the tall claims related to Bhakra. According to the report, '.....the figures put forward for areas to be irrigated by the Bhakra project were highly aggregated. Indeed, even the areas that it could ultimately service, it able to do so by virtually drying up the river and cutting off areas previously irrigated. Moreover, Bhakra did not add any new areas under irrigation-it only transferred or shifted the irrigation from one set of the areas to another -from areas that were already irrigated to other areas' (Kumar 2008). That means the contribution of the project to India's food grain production is far from the tall claims and no where near target. Moreover, this project leads to tremendous social and psychological cost for persons who are forcefully displaced from their original habitat.

NGO involvements in mobilizing public support and cooperation for development work based on the Gandhian notion of voluntarism is a strategy in post Independence developmental processes. The present paper tries to analyse the mode of operation and the role of NGO in construction of embankments along the Koshi River. It shows that how the workers of the said NGO became the Govt. contractor and vocal advocate of embankments creation as against the aspiration of people they were representing in the panchayat. The changing role of worker as agents of ruling party and government as against facilitating role of human resources is an important observation. According to the author 'unit leaders became the agents of ruling party and government for the decades and a cadre of contractor cum agent was informally and indirectly received patronage from prominent political leaders of the area.' He further added , 'though the basic idea behind involvement of BSS was facilitating human resources , however, it got involved in construction of roads , bridges and canals and subsequently the issue of corruption by BSS cadre under political patronage was raised in many quarters'. This obviously creates two clear groups: gainers and losers. It seems that a large part of the affected people is losers. Their perception is extremely necessary which is absent in the whole analysis. The author successfully captures the whole issue of engagement of panchayat leaders and their corruption, close proximity and patronage of political leaders. He also tries to show that construction of dam and annual maintenance work that constitute huge contract work can be useful for creating political cadre for ruling party.

Any development caused displacement often leads to severe impoverishment to the affected people. Compensation and rehabilitation for forced displaces has been treated as a measure to rationalize the forceful eviction from their habitat by the Government. While discussing the issue compensation, the author tries to explore the nature of compensation and rehabilitation package, power politics of getting compensation, process of delivery system of relief. Another interesting dimension has been discussed whether distribution of relief measures pays dividend to political party. The author rightly pointed that relief distribution often exposes bureaucratic attitude towards powerless people and the processes leads to further exclusion of the disposed and vulnerable people.

Affected persons are forced to leave their original habitat due to drastic reduction of employment opportunities in the affected zone. The study tries to identify the factors that forced people to migrate to other places due to recurrent flood of Koshi River citing some evidences. But those evidences have been put forward without any solid ground. For example, the author writes, 'it has been found out that a vast number of rescued children from several factories come from districts of Kosi region' without mentioning the source. Author pointed that thousands of people forced to migrate to other areas in search of livelihood. He added that in most families, men have migrated and women and children were left behind in a state of fear and anxiety. It would be have been interesting if the study could concentrate on how women adjust to the changed situation as the burden of flood coping falls heavily on women to maintain household sustenance.

Controlling and channelising the course of river by constructing embankment along the river and maintenance not only requires high expenditure but also creates political culture of politician, bureaucrat and contractor nexus. Though the study mainly concentrated on institutional weakness of governance, controlling strategy by embankment creation and associated political culture, this study lacks an understanding of people's own initiative to cope with recurrent disasters. As the disaster is sudden and unexpected disruption of normal structural arrangements within a social system, how society or individuals respond or adjust to the new situation is an important area of disaster research. A better understanding of response or adjustment from the socio-political and historical perspective may help in preparing a policy of resettlement.