

Disaster and Developmental Experience

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The present day political regimes of differing ideological orientations assign great value to democracy. An aura of legitimacy is conferred to rules, regulations, policies, use of power and authority, etc, when it is by way of sustaining a 'democracy' as it is perceived to be in the interest of people at large, more so due to its developmental nature. The developmental democracy underlines the indispensability of democratic institutions to actively involve citizens in the process of governance. It presupposes a correlation between democracy, development and governance in the common parlance. However, the recent developments are testimonies of the fact that large numbers of people are excluded from the ambit of dialogue and deliberations on issues which impact their everyday existence. State responsiveness to social claims and the ability of representatives of government to engage with poorer section of the society for any policy concerns is extremely limited in India. The governing techniques, tactics, and practices by the 'administrative state' have observed a shift over the years. The modern state is indeed a governmental state whose agencies use multiple techniques for governing the people.

In the process of governing a democracy, the state and its agencies have to manage everyday administrative activities and at the same time it has to deal with emergency and risk situations, as and when it arises. The competence and capacity of the state gets challenged in situations of disaster and risk and developmental democracy is expected to stand up to the expectations of people. Most of the disasters occur in a socio-political space, even though it is not determined by politics solely. It is increasingly evident that disasters have become recurrent features of social life across the world and they indeed continue posing risks to the very social world where they are located. Engagements in disaster response provide rich repository for research and it gives sound understanding of socio-political systems, structure and processes. In the developmental democracy, it is a matter of serious engagement to understand as what makes government responsive to people in normal situation as also in times of risk and disasters. The experiences of disaster in Bhopal 1984, Gujarat Riot 2002, Tsunami 2004... and Bihar Floods 2008, etc. clearly depicts that the response of developmental democracies varies enormously.

When it comes to disaster, conventionally it is regarded as natural and an act of god and within its ambit comes drought, floods, earthquakes, cyclones, etc. And therefore when something like Bhopal gas tragedy or communal violence takes place, the preparedness of state comes in serious scrutiny. The negligence of state agencies in preventing such disasters is never taken seriously. The beholders of authority and power of state decide as who the victim is, who needs compensation, how compensation is doled out and whom it won't be provided. It is this small ruling actor of developmental democracy who makes a decision whether the situation should be treated as national calamity or 'regular' calamity. Through 'expert' status, these politicians and bureaucrats decide what kind of development response should be made in the affected area.

The occurrence of disaster varies in terms of their predictability and unpredictability. Normally, earthquake, tsunami, cyclone, etc are relatively less predictable as compared to floods. In some of the flood prone areas, the seasonality and impact of disaster can be estimated and accordingly plans can be made. In Kosi area, the recurrence factor of flood is largely predictable; however, severity is normally unpredictable. The issues of flood control, displacement due to dams and embankments, relief and rehabilitation, and compensation for losses are inevitably intertwined with the functioning of developmental democracy. The

history of embankment and barrage construction on Kosi and rampant corruption for its maintenance and repair shows various dimensions of developmental democracy. There is long history of debate against embanking of Kosi during colonial regime. However, the debate was renewed in the beginning of post-colonial era and finally a barrage was constructed in 1963 to regulate the flow of the river and to 'facilitate irrigation'. From the beginning, the decision of embanking was a politically contentious issue and there were polarization for and against barrage construction. The process of governing the poor immediately after independence was dictated by the notion of demands of development for strengthening the 'democratic nation'. On the one hand the embankment were expected to protect 214,000 hectares of land, however, on the other side nearly 200,000 people of more than 300 villages were likely to be trapped within the embankment and there were major apprehension and insecurities among them. After four decades, it has been proved that embankments have a disastrous impact in the state. The region is marred with poverty and rampant migration due to destruction caused by the fury of Kosi, infamously called 'sorrow of Bihar'.

The area is known for its political influence as it has been represented by political heavy weights such as J.B.Kripalani, L.N.Mishra, Jagannath Mishra, B.P.Mandal (architect of Mandal Commission), Lalu Prasad, Sharad Yadav and many more at different point in time. In fact the decision of making Kosi dam was taken due to extensive lobbying by L.N.Mishra, the making of which saved his ancestral village from recurring flood. Besides, it provided opportunity to his relative to amass huge wealth through contract of various kinds. He, his brother and other relatives were charged with corruption allegation by standing committee of Bihar assembly. The general perception in the area is that the dam was made to save the Brahmin caste and it adversely affected the deprived caste as most of them are between the embankments. The dam which was constructed after a treaty between India and Nepal was always treated in Nepal as a coercive agreement under the pressure of 'big brother' India.

In the 2008 Bihar floods, the functioning of development democracy is indeed very interesting for the purpose of realizing the pulls and pressures by competing political parties, the relationship between state and central government, the caste dynamics of the area and its implications for the relief and governmental approach. The Kosi region is dominated by yadav caste and by dalits who traditionally voted in favour of Lalu Prasad and RamVilas Paswan. Though their candidates lost from most of the constituencies of the area in the last assembly election, they thought that the flood provided them an opportunity to influence the communities by arranging relief package for the flood victims. On the other hand the Chief Minister, who is otherwise appreciated for 'good governance', was lackadaisical in relief and rehabilitation of flood victims, the reason for which can be understood through political affiliation of caste groups. Here, it is important to highlight that the state government was generally praised for flood relief in 2007 when flood affected the areas nearby Patna, a stronghold of Nitish Kumar. It proves that "Governments can use natural disasters to redistribute power through the political effect, favouring disaster spending in regions that are politically aligned with the party in power" (Cohen and Werker 2008: 797)¹. Relief becomes a political tool because through relief supporters can be obliged and by depriving relief opponents can be punished. However, despite widespread resentment against government response in 2008 Kosi floods, the electoral outcome did not reflect it. The fragmentation of communities between OBC/EBC, Dalit/Maha-Dalit, Muslims/pasmanda muslims became critical factor for electoral outcome rather than

¹ Charles Cohen and Eric D. Werker. The Political Economy of "Natural" Disasters. Journal of Conflict Resolution. Vol 52. No 6. December 2008. Pp 795-819

disillusionment from governing processes which otherwise gets manifested in routine discourse.

The study of disaster response helps in unravelling and dissecting of governing practices by democratic regime from the time of rescue to rehabilitation. It takes days for rescuing the stranded victims and state comes across as a weak and unprepared agency; substantively different from situations where state portrays its robustness. The profile of victims influences the decisions by the governing regime. The socio-economic and political status of affected people defines the decision of regime to fix the compensation. Meagreness of compensation and the process of delivery clearly demonstrate the class character of governing process. Unfortunately the discourse of development democracy rotates around relief materials such as polythene sheets, salt, candles, etc. and larger issue of claim making as right and entitlement is diffused.

Such situations give opportunity to understand the processes of governing- who gets? Who don't get? The processes of claims and counter claims? Normally one expects an element of sensitivity, accountability and responsibility on the part of governing agencies in a developmental regime. However, the procedure of damage assessment, vulnerability mapping and the process of distribution by the agencies provide opportunity to analyse the governing processes. Who are involved in assessment? What are their orientation and outlook towards exclusion as also towards the obligation of state? It is been observed that the procedural and techno legal aspects dictate the relief governing process. The technologies of rule were used in the form of utter chaos, confusion and bureaucratic complexities which were observed in the relief distribution centre (to supply relief materials to villagers) in the flood affected districts. The affected districts whose literacy rate ranges between 30-40 per cent and where most of the affected dalits are illiterate, the procedural complexity is a deliberate attempt to exclude a large chunk of already marginalised people. Such procedures help the dominant manage to get relief materials and the weak are left behind. State agencies play down the loss of lives and magnitude of the problem. It refuses to register the number of missing people. As counting and measuring has been made vital for technologies of governing processes, denial of this became exclusionary for affected population. Threat of women and child trafficking, child labour, etc demands developmental democracy to respond in a proactive manner but the executive agencies were neither oriented nor geared up to understand these concerns and therefore response was anything but responsible. In the context of marginality, a disaster situation pushes vulnerable communities to the limits of subsistence.

The *modus operadi* by the state reflect its tacit support in facilitating the out-migration and thereby minimising its developmental responsibilities vis-à-vis flood victims. Perennially on the brink of flood threat, the landless poor of the area has been migrating out of state for decades but the response of governing regime in the recent flood made Kosi region a site of forced migration. Thousands of people had started migrating within one week of disaster in search of livelihood; they knew they have to start life afresh. In many families, the men have migrated and women and children are living in a state of fear and anxiety. In the Kosi region, which has always been at the margins of existence, it is important to analyse the decision to allow flood victims to travel in train without ticket. As consequence of disaster, forced migration, trafficking, child labour, etc becomes coping mechanism of people.

Innumerable account of social exclusion, discrimination, lack of preparedness and high handedness of state during the Kosi disaster shows that the institutional discourse and governmental praxis need to be properly researched. In order to understand the disaster and governmental policies as part of developmental experience, Kosi floods can be an apt case study. This can be done through:

- 1) Analysis of existing policies and guidelines for flood management and relief, analysis of functioning of development agencies for the welfare/rehabilitation of Kosi flood victims
- 2) Analysis of citizens' report, newspaper clippings
- 3) Narratives from politicians, bureaucrats and engineers who are at the helm of affairs in terms of policy implementation, maintenance of Kosi dams and embankments, coordination of relief distribution, overall disaster management.
- 4) The oral account of victims, activists, volunteers and other civil society groups. Exploring their sense of vulnerability, exclusion, processes of 'aid' distribution', processes of rebuilding their lives- role of developmental democracy under the aegis of State.
- 5) Tracking the forced migrants' movement through rail route.