

Tragedy of the Kosi Flood Plain: Making a Difference

Bihar Fellowships: Mahendra Yadav, Raman Singh, Archana Singh and Satish Suman

Background

There is a swath of land in eastern Bihar, which is home to some of the poorest people in India. It is not a barren land and there is plenty of water, only there is just too much of it. The principal author of this tragedy is a river, the Kosi, but it has plenty of help from human errors and mismanagement. Kosi carries water from some of the highest peaks in the world including The Mount Everest. In its lower courses, it descends steeply down the Shivalik range, cutting through its softer, older rocks. Thus, it enters the plains with an enormous load of silt, one of the heaviest of any river in the world. And it is ready to dump it at the least bit of an obstacle.

Man's Attempt to Tame the Wild Kosi

Through the hundred or so miles that it travels from Nepal down to its merging with the Ganga, Kosi changes course repeatedly and violently, moving as much as half a kilometer per year and breaking up in as many as a dozen streams. For centuries, people have co-existed with Kosi, managing through its repeated floods but also benefiting from the rich soil of the alluvial plain so created. But in the 1950's, the politicians decided that Kosi had to be tamed. They built a barrage at its entry in to India followed that by a series of embankments, shackling the river from its stretch of up to 100 miles to a narrow corridor down, in certain places, to a mere 7 km.

Nature Strikes Back: The Unintended Consequences

From here on it is a story of poor planning, broken promises and shoddy implementation. The most devastating blow occurred in August 2008. Rising rapidly due to heavy rains and a riverbed raised high due to heavy silting, the Kosi broke out of its eastern embankment and rushed down through a channel it had abandoned years ago. As much as 93% of its water followed this route, plunging a vast area into complete chaos. Such floods - and they are occurring repeatedly - are only one of the many unintended consequences of the Kosi project. Heavy silting, for example, has so raised the narrow river plain that the water is seeping, waterlogging the areas outside the embankments, and thus negating the very benefits of the original project. But most damning is the ongoing catastrophe in the lives of the over two million people stuck between the two embankments, left to the mercy of a callous state machinery and a wild river raging to break its shackles.



Fellowship and the Nature of Work

This is the background for the work being done by IFA Fellow Mahendra Yadav. After finishing his masters in Ancient history from Gorakhpur University, Mahendra dedicated his life in service of the marginalized communities. He has worked for RTI, MNREGA



and earlier received a Fellowship from AID, a US organization similar to IFA. The work centers on organizing villagers of the inter-embankment region to expose corruption and ensure proper implementation of flood relief and rehabilitation. These are mostly SC/ST communities living in dire circumstances. Mahendra leads a loose network of around 50 volunteers working in the districts of Supaul and Madhepura via an unregistered organization, **Kosi Nav Nirman Manch**. While they directly work in a dozen or so villages, thousands of workers, farmers, women and youth are connected with the organization. The impact of this work extends to all the 380 villages in the Kosi inter-embankment region. They have no institutional support and make do with contributions from friends and well wishers. IFA granted a Fellowship to Mahendra in 2018 and one year later the other three Fellowships were added. The result is a solid network of grassroots activists that is striving to bring empowerment to two million people.

Main Components of Work

- Organize villagers to pressure the Govt. for proper relief and rehabilitation of the inter-embankment residents
- Supplemental primary education via volunteer schools (**Jeevanshalas**)
- Support better income and better, cheaper inputs for small farmers via a Producer Company
- Pressure the Govt. against tax levy on struggling farmers of the basin
- Direct relief for flood victims and during the Covid-19 pandemic

Women's and Youth Activities

The Women's and Youth Activities being undertaken in Koshi have been instrumental in empowering women and young people in the region. The Koshi Women's Forum has played a significant role in organizing leadership development workshops and seminars aimed at enhancing the leadership skills of women. On Women's Day, the forum organized a seminar on the topic "Women of Koshi in 75 years of independence," which was well-attended and received a positive response from the community. Additionally, the launch of the girls' hockey team has been a game-changer, giving young girls the opportunity to develop self-confidence and participate in sports, while also protecting them from unwanted attention from boys. The youth club and library have also been a great resource for young people, with over 20 youth benefiting from the resources provided on a daily basis, particularly in connecting with peers and preparing for competitive exams. These initiatives have been crucial in building a more inclusive and empowered community in Koshi, one that values the contributions and potential of all its members, regardless of gender or age.



The recent activities in Koshi have focused on various issues affecting the community, including relief work for flood victims, land ownership disputes, and raising awareness about important issues in the legislative assembly. The two-day Satyagraha held on 14th and 15th February 2022 resulted in the district officer asking the district disaster in-charge to expedite the process of payment of house damage money and provide assistance for the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. However, after waiting for months with no resolution to the issue, a public interest litigation was filed in Patna High Court (CWJC 7429/2022). Relief work for flood victims has been ongoing, with relief material distributed to 300 people and relief kits provided to those whose houses have been destroyed.



Flood relief materials being distributed by the Koshi Manch



8th Kisan Jagruti Mahapanchayat

Additionally, efforts have been made to raise awareness about the questions of flood victims in the legislative assembly and to provide flood alert forecasts through WhatsApp messages. The organization of the 8th historical Kisan Jagruti Mahapanchayat was a major event attended by more than 2000 people, with guest social workers such as Medha Patkar, Arvind Murthy, and Nutan Malvi in attendance.

Another important development has been the participation of fellows in ICAN work. The fellows collaborated with various groups of the ICAN organization and participated in a meeting held in Wardha. The participation in ICAN work reflects its commitment to social and environmental justice issues, and its desire to collaborate with like-minded organizations. The public hearing held in the region, with the participation of social workers, reporters, and local social workers, is an excellent example of efforts raised for awareness about important issues affecting the community. These activities demonstrate the commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of its citizens and building a more just and equitable society.

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