

Tabahi- Ki Gawahi – Bihar Floods.

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Respected Madam President

Magnitude of the problem

We have been actively involved on the ground, since the very first days, in the unfortunate months of August 2008 when the Eastern Embankment of Kosi river was breached for the first time, at Kusha, upstream of the Viripur barrage in Nepal, in the last fifty years. Nearly 4 million people, living on the eastern bank of Kosi, from Kusaha to Kursela, some in Nepal, and mostly in the districts of Supaul, Araria, Purnea, Saharsa, Madhepura, Khagadia, Katihar and Naugachia were suddenly affected by this disaster. It will be a misnomer to call this event, floods, as the discharge in the river at that time was only about 1 lac cusecs, much below the norm of 4 lac cusecs when it is labeled as floods. We have, in fact called it ***jal-narsmhar*** or ***water- genocide***, as the river suddenly changed its course due to the breach in the embankment and deluge overtook millions within no time. It must be borne in mind that the people in these districts had not faced floods for the last fifty years. It took more than a few days for the government to respond with rescue and relief measures. It has been our endeavor to raise the voices of the people from below, call the attention of the government to various measures needed on the ground and hold government accountable for its actions.

It is very important to keep in mind that other districts of Bihar on the western side of embankment have also suffered from floods this year, as in the previous years. The total number of flood affected districts is eighteen. The misery of these people is no less than the people on the other side of the embankment. Unfortunately all the attention, including that of the state government seems to be focused on the five districts on the eastern side and the relief and rehabilitation needs of other affected people have been almost totally neglected.

Since August 22nd we have travelled in this area thrice, (22nd August to 10th October –Kusaha to Forbesganj; 11th October to 21st October –boat journey from Kusaha to Kursela and again in November 8-11 in the same area to observe the situation on the ground, meet the affected people in the villages and study the rescue and relief measures undertaken by the state government. Based on these studies and observations, we have prepared a report, which we are enclosing with this submission.

Relief measures

Our report acknowledges the Herculean measures adopted by the civil society in Bihar , NGOs and the agencies of the state government with support from central government to provide rescue and relief to the affected people. However the report also shows almost total failure of the government machinery in providing effective rescue operations, instituting effective relief measures and providing adequate compensation and rehabilitation. The unfortunate four million people in these districts bear with their sufferings helplessly and with sense of resignation. Despite the massive relief operations, there is total dissatisfaction amongst the people with what has been done. Instead of being satisfied with the honest and sincere efforts of the agency of the government, people are totally dissatisfied and disenchanted , because it is honesty and sincerity which is lacking in the efforts of the various government agencies and NGOs. ***We appeal to you, Madam President to issue necessary direction to the State and Central government to institute the third party monitoring of the relief measures to bring order and ensure that effective relief and rehabilitation measures are not denied to the people of Bihar in this hour of crisis and human tragedy.***

Rehabilitation

Madam President, Bihar needs a new vision today for its development, for effective basin management, for effective rehabilitation of the thousands of families disposed due to this unfortunate calamity. These measures will take time. For next few years, there should be a special package for the flood ravaged areas. The farmers need to be provided seeds, equipments, credit and technical advice to resurrect the agriculture. The artisans needs support for cottage industry. The landless need special employment programmes instead of forced migration. These can be used to resurrect the supporting infrastructure and sustainable flood prevention measures. ***What Bihar needs is a new master plan or Marshall Plan. Unfortunately such a vision is lacking today and Bihar is forced to resort to self pity and despondency. Can we request you, to provide a lead in giving a new hope to Bihar.***

Why did this deluge take place?

In this unfortunate scenario, there is a foremost question in everyone's mind, as to why the embankment breached in the first instance despite being no pressure of water. The situation is complicated by the dual and overlapping role of the Central and State governments in the management of the river basins. The Central Government/PMO has constituted a committee which has found reasons to blame the state government for the breach in the embankment. The report of this committee is not available in the public domain. However the Central government has not allowed the State government to constitute its own committee to investigate the breach in the embankment. The result of all this confusion is that truth has not come out in the open

and all kinds of rumors are in the air. While the element of neglect in maintenance and error in timely repair is the natural inference, the situation is complicated by the fact that till one day ago (17th August, 2008) the control room in Patna had received no prior warning about any impending breach. On the day of the breach, the water level was minimal. Only 2 spurs have broken down in the afflux dam at 12 and 13 km and the breach in the eastern wall. ***There is a very strong belief in the people in the area, that the breach could be act of sabotage, which is a very serious matter and needs a thorough probe. We appeal to you to get the necessary directions to the state and central government to immediately constitute a judicial commission to investigate the causes of the breach of the embankment, under the serving judge of the High Court, to find the guilty and punish them in a time bound manner.***

Long term measures

It should also be kept in mind that at least 1/3rd of these people have already migrated out of state of Bihar for their very survival. An unfortunate and perverse euphoria also prevails over the so-called positive impact of the migration for the people and resultant post-office-money order economy of Bihar. It is also said in some quarters that since the poor and downtrodden are migrating out, it also provides a solution to the problem of 'naxalism'. A virtue is tried to be made out of the tragedy. The massive and chronic suffering of the forced migration, the pains of the loved ones left behind and the loss of culture and heritage of the State and people is something totally forgotten in this perverse effort by those who are essentially criminal beneficiaries of this mis-management and mis-governance. .

We, as a nation, today suffer from a very divisive and fragmented polity and the lack of an effective voice of the civil society. This has led to a situation where the various arms of the state and government are not really accountable. It is clear to us, based on our understanding of the floods problem in Bihar and our interactions with a cross section of people in the last few months that the whole response of the government suffers from a bad conscience. This is due to the ill-deeds and wrong policy options adopted in the last sixty years by the successive governments. There is a general tendency for the various political parties to blame the other for the errors of omission and commission in their own successive regimes. At the same time the bureaucracy blames the politicians, the technocracy blames them both and the civil society blames all three. (Very recently the Government of India has declared the river Ganga a national river and the future implications of this decision on the respective responsibilities of the central and state governments in management of river basins in Bihar need to understand with all its ramifications.)

No formal evaluation of the massive investments made in the embankments on the rivers of Bihar has been undertaken by any agency of the state or central government in last sixty years. However there seems to be an overall consensus in all quarters, irrespective of class creed or ideology that the measures undertaken have failed to deliver the goods and situation has only worsened. However, the views totally differ on what should be the solution today. One of the key questions today is whether

the current breach in the eastern embankment can be repaired now or should it be repaired at all? The other major issue is whether the solution lie in making a reservoir in the upper areas of Nepal, a policy option not adopted in the last sixty years? There is no clear answer to these questions and an honest and sincere debate is being avoided by all. Avoidance of this debate and sincere exploration of answer to these essential questions will only lead to the repetition of the mistakes of the past and continued misery for the people of Bihar. The Government of Bihar has already embarked in the exercise of repairing the breaching in the eastern embankment. A massive sum of Rs 197 crore has been allocated by the central government for this purpose. We are afraid that without consulting the voices of the civil society and the dissenting experts, this measure is bound to run into difficulties and failure.

There is first of all, in our considered view, a need for all, most of all state politicians and bureaucracy to admit with an open mind the mistakes of last sixty years and the failures of the policy options chosen under whatever beliefs, compulsions, illusions or motivation. ***A genuine act of repentance of our collective sin, will give us the moral strength and wisdom to begin on a new path. Unfortunately such a realization is lacking today.*** A policy formulation needs to begin with the *last man (woman and child)* in view and in consultation and participation of the *last person* in our policy and civil life (famous statement of the Mahatma). Unfortunately, our current governance leaves no scope for such an undertaking.

In our view, there is need for a concerted action to continue to provide relief, compensation and rehabilitation to the affected people. At the same time, the civil society should become an equal participant in the effort to find the medium and long term solution to the flood problems and management of the river basins and evolution of policy and programmes in this direction. **We are groping in the dark and we need inspiration and guidance from you, Madam President, as the highest custodian of the Constitution of this country, you are responsible for ensuring that the constitutional guarantees to the citizens of India are provided in the letter and spirit by the governments of the day. We need a national political will to turn the fate of these four million unfortunate people of Bihar and find permanent solution to the problem.**

We appeal to you to make appropriate intervention with the State and Central Government in furtherance of the above appeal of the suffering millions in Bihar.

Thanking you

Yours sincerely

Enclosed: The report – Tabahi ki Gawahi- Witness to the destruction