

# **Tabahi Ki Gawahi** **(Witness to the Destruction)**

**A voice of the flood affected people of Bihar**

**Submitted to the President of India**

## **Respected President**

We have been active since the very first days in the unfortunate months of August 2008 when the eastern embankment was breached for the first time upstream of the Viripur barrage in last fifty years and 4 million people were suddenly affected by the floods. It has been our endeavor to raise the voices of the people from below and hold government accountable for its actions.

In the month of October we undertook a boat journey of the affected villages and prepared a report.

There is first of all 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 in view and in consultation and participation of the last person in our policy and civil life ( famous statement of Mahatma). Unfortunately, our current governance leaves no scope for such an undertaking. We are groping in the dark and we need inspiration and guidance from you, as the highest custodian of the constitution of this holy land.

IN our view, there is need for a concerted action to continue to provide relief and rehabilitation to the affected people. At the same time the civil society should become an equal participant in 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.

The situation is complicated by the dual role of the central and state governments, 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.

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 4 million unfortunate people of Bihar and find permanent solution to the problem.

In this context, we would like to bring the following to your notice:

### **1. Immediate Issues and measures**

A mechanical institution and dispensation of customary relief measures may be face saving for the government of the day but it will not address even the immediate challenges of the day. In this context, the following needs to be taken into consideration:

### **How the people are affected**

The affected people and non-affected people can be divided into different categories, based on their peculiar location and circumstances. This is of utmost to evolve an effective policy and programme response to the tragic situation:

#### ***People directly affected***

- Out of 1000 affected villages, there are still nearly 200 villages which are till date inundated with water and people are stranded inside. ( nearly 1 million people). They need continued relief and rehabilitation measures and this has not reached them in last three months due to lack of access.
- One fourth of the affected population is managing to stay with their relatives or friends.
- One third of the people immediately affected by the recent floods have migrated to distant places leaving their families, old people and children behind. Many of them may never return to their native places also. The number of these people may be nearly 1.5 million. Large number of these are dalits, ati dalits and mahadalits.
- More than a lakh of people are living on Railway lines and roads at the mercy of God.

#### ***Status of relief measures:***

- Large numbers of non-affected people have also joined the relief camps being run by the government and the NGOs.
- The relief camps have been set up in distant places and people have no means to reach these camps. Even the government boats make illegal charges of rs 50-150. People have to repeatedly go to these camps.
- About 25% of people do not a.p.l cards or b.p.l cards and are not able to get advantage of any relief measures.
- If the people raise protests, they are subjected to lathi charge and arrests.
- There are all kind of irregularities in the distribution of declared relief of Rs. 2250 and One quintal grains.

#### ***Other issues related to rehabilitation needs***

- Many villages have completely disappeared. Due to soil erosion, many other villages are being subjected to the same fate.
- Most of the flood affected areas are filled with sand and there is very little possibility of sowing the next rabi crop.
- The cattle have died in large numbers and there is no supply of fodder. The people are forced to make distress sale.

- The houses are damaged. The huts are completely destroyed.
- Health and education establishments have come to complete halt in the five districts. The other facilities of life and transportation etc. have also come to standstill.
- There are widespread rumors of the trafficking of women and children
- The law and order situation in these areas is not good. There are instances of the looting of the relief material and the local dominant elements are depriving the others of their rights and entitlements. Even the people of the unaffected dry neighboring villages trouble the people from affected villages.

***People not directly affected***

- There is a draught like situation in areas which are not affected by floods due to lack of rains. The landless are in particularly precarious situation here.

**Issue of the Repair of the Breach in the Embankment**

- The Kosi is not flowing in any defined stream after the breach of the eastern embankment (*compare with the statement that it is flowing through 300 year old abandoned channel; another statement – Kosi is flowing in seven different streams*). It is spread over an area of width of 20-30 km.
- The stream of the river upto the Virpur barrage and further down is filled with silt upto 25ft deep.
- There is a need for consensus and consultation with all interests of the people and different experts on the issue of the repair of the breach. For example the people in the 380 villages inside the embankment (nearly 1.5 million) are against repairing the breach. The people on the western bank may also be harboring similar sentiments.
- The task of repairing this breach seems to be neither feasible, an impossibility and nor desirable, the same has been suggested by other experts. Even if the breach is repaired, it will not survive the next rains. Yet the Govt of Bihar has embarked upon a scheme of 160 crores for the repair without taking civil society and experts into confidence- influence of AsDB and other international agencies. Our team visited the breach area in October and November and found no visible evidence of concerted works being undertaken for the repair of the breach.

- There is no mechanism for raising the voice of the people and expression of their views, emotions and sentiments,. There is widespread atmosphere of hopelessness and dejection. Even when we presented the report 'tabahi ki gawahi', no government representative joined our meetings.

### **Others – Governance**

- The national disaster act and – not operative.
- Civil society ( non-NGO) has played a very important role in the initial stages when there was no government relief, as always. This is not reckoned by the state.
- The image of the NGOs and others engaged in relief operations and the politicians has taken a negative beating.
- There is a lack of dialogue within civil society and between civil society and state.

## **2. Long term Measures**

- The total compensation package of Rs. ... crores is required.
- There is large scale destruction of roads, rails, canals, ponds schools, temples and government buildings.
- This is for the first time that the embankment has been breached upstream of the barrage. The previous breaches were in the downstream areas of the barrage. Moreover the water flow in the river was minimal this time( only 1 lakh cusecs, while flood situation has minimum 4 lakh cusecs of water), how did it cause the breach is a mystery. The PMO committee has taken an easy recourse to blaming the state government, while the commission appointed by the state government has been asked to disband, as it is an issue with international implications. The speculations have been made that this was deliberate breach and this serious matter must be investigated the truth should come in the open. However people have no faith in the judicial commission.
- The linkage to the Farrakha barrage due to higher siltation and resulting impact on the long term solution ( not raised by others)
- The construction of dam, reservoir in Nepal seems to be emerging the policy measure in fashion as the solution to the problems of floods in Kosi. We have our doubts on it.
- A holistic policy package based not on flood control but river basin management with measures related to prevention of silting in catchment areas, micro-waster-shed managements and appropriate drainage schemes to provide uninterrupted flow to the rivers in this region are required in active consultation and participation of the people, to the last man and women. We need to be very cautious of the policy packages

propagated by the international development agencies and their consultants and negotiate with them on our own terms.

- The management of the existing embankment plans leaves the drainage out of site- example of NH-31 and Katihar-Barauni --- no place for the drainage of water
- The people from Maheshkhont to Kursela a population of 1 million is permanently flooded and doomed whether from the eastern side or western side.
- Other than the people affected by the eastern embankment breach, large number of other districts are also affected which are not in the focus.
- Many of the older streams of Kosi are under the control of mafia elements,