

BIHAR

Silent Agony of Retistan
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Looking from the Balua gram Panchayat in Supaul district of Bihar, one finds only silts and silts around covering an endless farmland. From what was a fertile area, raising four remunerative crops, it looks like an emerging *Retistan* (reti=silt). The 15-member team (including this writer) that was on visit to the most devastated districts of Bihar by the Kosi floods between 18 August 2008 and early January 2009 was dazed and stupefied at the grit of subalterns in their struggle against the unholy combine of civil contractors, bureaucrats and their political collaborators who have been exploiting the people living in the Kosi regions. Well-known for high fertility, requiring very little of canal irrigation and almost no chemicals for farming, no crop will be grown there unless the whole sheet of silts is desilted. Even then the normal cultivation practices cannot be restored.

The team led by Dr Dinesh Kumar Mishra, convenor, Barh Mukti Abhiyan (BMA)—Freedom from Flood Campaign—visited flood-hit areas of five districts. A civil engineer, Dr Mishra dedicated his life for the people affected by the mighty river that inundates large parts of Bihar almost every year for obsession with embankments to tame it, every time in vain. Dr Mishra's fascinating book—*Between Devil and Deep Waters*—is a tell-tale treatise of the plight of the subalterns, perennially neglected by the state and central governments, also by overwhelming majority of foreign-funded NGOs (obviously due to the agenda, dictated by alien interests) and to a great extent, the media. "Mishraji's book is my constant companion now", said Prem-shankar Singh, local council member of Runnisaidpur, Sitamarhi district, Communist Party of India.

People in the Kosi, Bagmati, Kamla and Gandak rivers are forced to live with catastrophes that ruin and displace them every year. One of those 'development refugees' told the team at Saharsa, "We know where we will live next year as we become oustees frequently. We have to use weed or wood-fired chulha for cooking, no cobwebs are seen over our thatched roofs. We have to shift our houses much before spiders start developing the webs".

"The colour of the sand in the vast area of the Kosi basin now resembles Jaisalmer (Rajasthan) and may need the help of the experts of Central Arid Zone Research Institute CAZRI, Jodhpur for revival of agriculture in the region", said Dr Mishra, an IIT-an, at a press conference after the weeklong visit to Bihar and Nepal, right up to the Kusaha village where the embankment had breached on 18 August last year. But whether revival of agriculture, affordable for the affected, is feasible has a big interrogation mark.

Before team members was 17-year-old Sheikh Taslim (name changed), just-back from several months of back-bending hard labour in Punjab to save his parents, brothers and sisters from starvation. "My hands and loin continue etching all the time", he said. He had to work in plots where genetically modified crops were raised. "I am awaiting another job in some other state", he added.

Nearly 1.5 million people spread over 414 villages between the eastern and western embankments of Kosi for which no concern was shown by anybody (government and the NGOs included). The Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar

is all set to repair and extend the eastern embankment at an estimated cost of Rs 339 crore, although embankments are proved failures in encountering floods the world over and in Kosi or Bagmati, Gandak and Kamala river basins. Embankments enrich coffers of an unholy combine of civil contractors, bureaucrats and political leaders. The CM made only routine visits to flood affected areas in August-September last year but never thereafter.

Surprisingly, political parties, including the Left (apart from insignificantly tiny pockets of CPI, frantically trying to retain the memories of Bhogendra Jha, the lone communist MP who took up cudgels for Kosi-victims), are inexplicably silent. The CPI(ML) Liberation, now the largest Left party in the state, has no mention of Kosi mega-crisis in its verbose election manifesto. Pathetically enough, *Economic & Political Weekly* in an editorial, extolling the United Left Bloc comprising the CPI(ML) Liberation, CPI and CPI(M), wrote, "Unlike the others, the ULB is mobilising popular support on the basis of issues such as relief to the people affected by the Kosi floods, problems faced by the employees of the public sector units that are in financial distress, and other livelihood-related issues". This is a cruel joke as far as the Kosi-hit subalterns are concerned as nowhere did anyone see or hear of protest actions in defence of flood-hit thousands. The CPI(M) has put up a candidate from the Supaul parliamentary constituency. Its presence needs to be witnessed with a powerful electron microscope. The CPI(M) staged a road-and-rail-roko agitation in December-end and got media footage with thousands of flood victims from Saharsa, Madhepura and Supaul districts. Over 50 victims, including women, were injured in a series of clashes with the police.

A sense of helplessness has engulfed some half a million people of flood-ravaged north Bihar. Spread over 993 villages of 35 blocks of five districts of Bihar, nearly 3.33 million people were affected by 2008 floods in Kosi basin and the temporarily shifted course with 237 thousand houses perished, according to the BMA. Some 600 persons had lost their lives. This figure may be an understatement as a senior official of a funding agency for several NGOs in eastern India and Nepal thinks more than 1400 people died or disappeared without traces.

The team apprehends, after visiting Prakashpur on the eastern bank in village Rajabaas in Sunsari district of Nepal, 14 km upstream of Kusaha, on a tip-off from some front-line workers of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and a few well-meaning journalists, another breach at Kosi there, warned veteran villagers of Prakashpur following a heavy shower. "If it happens, large portions of Purnea, Katihar and Darbhanga may go under water." □□□