

## Bagmati: the Sorrow of North Bihar

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AS HABITATS CAUGHT between the embankments in north Bihar are getting buried under the sediments brought in by floodwater during rainy season, the entire flood control planning needs a thorough review.

One often hears about the civilizations buried under earth and attributes various reasons for such disappearance of life from a particular place. Excavations reveal the way of life the people might have had before they chose to leave their villages and towns and allowed the nature to take its own course. These accounts are available in books and all believe the process told to people by historians and archeologists. These are all conjectures that are revealed by scientific investigations but how many seen, not read, how the civilizations get buried under the debris created by nature? There are places in Bihar where one can see the process of disappearance of civilization and the villages getting buried under the sediments brought by rivers.

A massive program in the name of flood control was undertaken in North Bihar in late 1950s to tame the rivers with heavy charge of sediments by constructing embankments along them to prevent their spilling. With the jacketing of the river, the bed level of the river started rising because the embankments, while preventing the floodwaters of the river to escape, prevented the spreading of the sediments on the countryside and stopped the natural land building process of the rivers and this process is now restricted to the space within the embankments that are separated by a distance of 2-3 kilometres in case of the Mahananda, Kamala and the Bagmati rivers to about 10-16 kilometres in case of the Kosi. It is customary to construct houses over the debris of the earlier house in case of its collapse in the flood prone areas of the country but this process is highly accelerated within the embankments along the rivers.

Let us visit some of the villages in the Bagmati basin of Bihar to have a feel of disappearance of human settlements and systematic burial of their assets under earth. Ibrahimpur village in the Runni Saidpur block of Sitamarhi district of Bihar is a case in point. This village was trapped between the two embankments along the rivers constructed in late 1970s. Some families of the village were given rehabilitation in the protected countryside of the embankments but the majority of them preferred to stay back within the embankments because their agricultural land was there and it was not possible for them to handle agricultural operations from their rehabilitation sites. As of now, there may be around 200-250 families in the rehabilitation site while those living between the river and the embankments are around 400. Because of sedimentation, the land within the embankments is about 15 feet higher than the adjoining countryside now. The height of the embankment may be another 8 feet above that level. Thus, the level difference between the countryside and the crest of the embankment may not be less than 23 feet in any case.

Says Nagendra Paswan of Ibrahimpur, '...Those living within the embankments have to build their house almost every year as it gets eroded, washed away or sunk partially in sand. Only good thing about us is that unlike the so-called protected countryside, our lives are not lost as the villagers know how to deal with a naughty river like the Bagmati. We don't have to face breaches. There is temple of Lord Shiva in our village. When the river rises during the rainy season, as waters enter the temple but when the river recedes, the temple gets filled till half its height with sand that has to be excavated to get the image out for worshipping and

performing rituals. Receding river does the same thing to our houses also. You can see my earlier house sunk in sand till lintel level and I am building the first floor but that would be the ground floor of my house.'

There used to be a Bailey bridge constructed by the Indian army at Kataunjha on the Bagmati some 4 kilometres downstream of Ibrahimpur on the Sitamarhi–Muzaffarpur Road and this often used to get submerged during the rainy season resulting in disruption of the traffic. This was converted into a regular concrete bridge in 2007. It solved the connectivity problem but opening in the bridge on the same river at Kataunjha is just 300 metres while the pair of the Bagmati embankments at this point is spaced at 3 kilometres. During floods, an afflux develops that drowns the villages upstream of the bridge leading to more sediment deposition within the embankments due to lesser waterway in the bridge. This bridge, essential as it is, would write more fierce stories of devastation in future. About 2.5 kilometres north of the Kataunjha bridge near Bhanaspatti on the Muzaffarpur-Sitamari Road a bridge has just been commissioned in 2010 that is about 12 feet higher than the old bridge on the same spot. So much of sediment passes through the area every year. Just wait for 15 more years and a new bridge will have to be built at Kataunjha over the existing Bagmati bridge. The river is being embanked beyond Runni Saidpur but the drainage of the country is missing from the plans. In coming 10-15 years, a tragedy worse than that of Kusaha will strike here for the simple reason that the river bed would be 25 feet higher than the countryside and the crest of the embankment, 35 feet. Agriculture has reached such a ruinous state that if the rains are deficient, even transplantation would not be possible and if there is slight excess of rains, the plants would pierce into the land like a peg. If the rains and the river could follow the instructions of the local people which is not possible, something would grow in their fields otherwise everything remains at the mercy of the rain God.

Not very far from Ibrahimpur, there is another village named Raksia which is the last major village as one travels from Indo-Nepal border to Runni Saidpur along the eastern embankment of the Bagmati. Two third of Raksia is now located inside the embankments and one third outside them. Most of agricultural land and houses were inside and many people did not come to the rehabilitation site even if they were given a plot there. Some of them were unhappy with the size of plots given to them and some were not interested in leaving their ancestral property within the embankments. Some purchased land outside the embankments and built their houses there. Not all people got the ownership papers of the land and those who received the papers are not sure whether the papers are genuine or fake because these papers were handed over to them after paying bribes to the babus of the department. Unprecedented sand casting has taken place within the embankments and the residents of Raksia suggest every visitor to have a look at their old Idgah within the embankments. The minarets of this structure were 27 feet high over the plinth level of the Idgah of which only four feet remains over ground now, rest all is buried under the Bagmati sand.

Mohammad Wasi of Raksia tells about plight of his village saying, '...I purchased land and constructed my house in the countryside of the embankment. Many others have done the same. The whole village is under a thick bed of sand. Within the embankments, such deposition is natural because of river flow. Outside the embankments the sand is there because of breaches upstream. Nothing grows in the fields here. Please go inside the embankments to see the situation there for yourself. A railway line is being constructed from Muzaffarpur to Sitamarhi on the eastern side of NH-77. This railway line is another embankment and we are going to be trapped between the embankment of the Bagmati and the railway embankment very soon. Please come back to know more about us when the railway embankment is completed.'

There is an interesting example of a village sinking in sand at Anandpur Paras in Anandpur Maran panchayat of Alauli block in Khagaria district. Floodwater starts coming here in the month of July in the second week and the situation remains grim till the month of October. The flood level comes down then but the streams and the nallahs remain active and transportation depends on boats for a couple of months more. In 1987, an offshoot of the Kosi came and joined the river here. This stream is called Bahawa Dhar. This added to the flow of the Bagmati and all the villages below Phuhia were hit by this additional flow and erosion and water logging is on the rise. Shrikant Azad of Anandpur Paras tells, '...Constructing an embankment along the river was the plan of the Government and there was no public demand for it. This might have been constructed, around 1960-62 and after it was built, the people living within the embankment and outside it suffered equally... After few years, the land inside the embankment started rising and the one outside it became low lying and water logged. If the embankment breaches now, one storey high water moves ahead. Anything that comes in the way of this water column is bound to get smashed. The embankment often breaches 5-7 kilometres upstream from this place and if we get some information about it, we are alerted. If it breaches here near our place, the lower areas will have to face deluge. In case of the breach upstream, the river dries here in our place. If you dig the place where you are sitting, you will hit the floor of earlier house some 20 feet below. That is the degree of sedimentation here. I wanted to dig the land to recover some bricks for building my new house but could not dig it to the end. After digging up to a depth of 5 to 6 feet, the walls of the pits started collapsing and we left digging any further. Those possessing land here were ruined because they could not leave it and go but those who had no land had a better mobility and could go anywhere looking for employment.'

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The land on which paddy used to grow in abundance prior to the construction of the embankments, it also used to produce a good harvest of pulses and oil seeds in the Rabi season. Embankments first destroyed the monsoon crop but the chances of Rabi were still there. Slowly, sand deposition on the land eliminated Rabi crop also, the farmer, however, never leaves his land fallow. He always takes a chance that something might grow on his field but that has become a loser's game now. For the past 3-4 years, some cucumber, musk-melon and water melon growers from Uttar Pradesh have started coming to the area. They have an expertise in growing these fruits and varying depth of sands and they take the land on an annual lease against a lease amount of Rs. 800/- to Rs. 1000/- a bigha and sell their produce in the local market or even sell it in other cities. This arrangement has given some relief to some of the farmers of villages like Barahi Jagadish and Kahira Pahari who have witnessed the journey of growing paddy followed by wheat and now cucumber and melons on their fields.

Ramashish of village Minapur Balaha, Block Piparahi, District Sheohar says, '...Even Bhang (Hemp-Cannabis Sativa) and Dhatura (Thorn Apple) does not grow on this land within the embankments. The people here did not know what is Punjab or Delhi but today they have to go there and find jobs. If our family members don't send money to us from there, it would be difficult for us to get two square meals.' Mahesh Sahani from the same village maintains, 'Our entire village was located within the embankments. There is no land outside the embankments and that forced us to come to the rehabilitation site. I had five bighas of land and all that was consumed by the river and I am left with nothing. I do not know when the river would vacate my land. I lived on my land like a master but now work as a labor on others' land. I have to take care of my family.'

The river, however, will keep on depositing sediments and raising the ground level within the embankments to the detriment of the people living there. They will have to quit one day and migrate to distant places to meet their ends. The process is just 30 years old and may

get completed in another 20 years. Unlike instances in the history, here the villages will gain archeological importance within only 50 years. Should rivers be freed to spread sediments to all the places where floodwater could reach during rainy season so that the natural land building by rivers is not thwarted be an answer? That happens to be the duty assigned to rivers by nature. Civilizations would still be buried but not in just 50 years. It would take thousands of years. But is there anyone who cares? □□□

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