

Floods – need to look beyond blame game

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The Government of India adopted the first Flood Control Policy in 1954 and proceeded to construct 33928.642 kilometers of embankments along its rivers, 38809.857 kilometers of drainage channels dug to drain unwanted floodwaters and protect 2458 towns against floods and raise 4716 villages above the maximum observed flood level.

Any area, which has at any time been subjected to flooding, is considered flood prone unless it has been effectively protected. The flood prone area of the country, as per the first Five Year Plan (FYP), was only 25 million hectares (mh). It rose to 33.516 mh when the Rashtriya Barh Ayog (RBA) report assessed its extent in 1980. The Working Group on Flood Control Programme set up by the Planning Commission for the 10th Five Year Plan has estimated the current flood prone areas as 45.64 m ha, out of which an area of 16.457 mh was estimated to be protected as of March 2004. The Central Water Commission suggests that the state protected 18.222 mh of land against flooding till March 2006. This left a balance of 27.418 mh yet to be provided with any kind of flood protection. The unprotected area is more than what the total flood prone area of the country was in the 50s.

Obviously, the investment in the flood control sector in the country is inadequate and the flood spread area is on the rise. These figures are often countered with the argument that the losses appear to be rising because of the rise in the population and the increase in the land and property prices in the so called flood protected areas. Jagjivan Ram, in his foreword to the RBA report (1980), attributed it to better techniques of assessment of losses and not to the real rise in the incidence of floods in the country.

Presently, on an average, 7.63 mh of land across the country are flooded every year affecting 32.92 million people. Crops over 3.56 mh valued at Rs. 705.87 crores are lost every year due to floods, which also destroy 12, 35,000 houses, kill 94,000 cattle and 1590 persons. The estimated annual damage due to floods is estimated to be around Rs.1782.35 crores.

It is worth noting that the nationwide floods of 1954 had a spread area of only 7.490 mh. This had gone up by 22 times in the 51 years between 1954 and 2004 despite an investment of Rs. 8113.11 crores till the end of the ninth FYP (2002). There was a plan outlay of Rs 5922.00 crores for the 10th FYP, and the 11th FYP envisages an outlay of Rs. 15,733 crores for the flood control sector. Despite this investment, states like Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan regularly figure on the flood map of India, and states like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu are not lagging behind. The flood prone area of many states has gone up after the publication of the RBA (1980) report. In Bihar it has gone up to 6.88 m ha (4.26 m ha), Orissa 3.340 m ha (1.40 m ha), and West Bengal 3.716 m ha (2.65 m ha). The figures in bracket indicate flood prone areas as reported in the RBA Report (1980). No change has been reported in the flood prone areas of Assam (3.15 m ha) and Uttar Pradesh (7.336 m ha) and it is quite likely that no assessment of the flood prone areas has been taken up in these states.

With the rise in the flood prone area of the country, more and more people are coming under the flood net. This, obviously, is an indicator of failure of flood control policies that mainly depend on structural measures of taming the rivers. The solution then is to minimize damages and provide succour to people who are affected by floods. The basic responsibility of carrying out relief operations is vested in the state government. The Central Government meets 75 per cent of the costs through the Calamity Relief Fund (CRF) while the rest is provided by the concerned state government.

To get an idea of what fraction of the flood hit population is actually served under relief; let us have a look into the losses of the badly flood hit district of Darbhanga in North Bihar in 2002. 1078 villages spread over 286 gram panchayats and 18 blocks with a population of 26.26 lakhs were hit by floods. Assuming each family had six members, nearly 4,37,670 families must have suffered the damages. According to official figures, only 28,839 (6.6 per cent) families were given shelter. On the other hand, in Gopalganj district (home district of the then chief minister), only seven blocks of this district comprising of 89 Gram Panchayats and 314 villages with a population of 6,96,000 were affected by floods that year. About 1,60,000 families were affected by the floods and the government provided relief to 58,295 (50.25) families. An example of how proximity to power leads to discrimination.

Floods in 2007 affected 22 districts, 264 blocks, 12,610 villages and a population of 248.13 lakhs in Bihar. Floods submerged a crop area of 16.63 lakh hectares and destroyed 7,36,857 houses killing 960 persons and 1006 animals according to the official reports. The government of Bihar had sent a request to the Centre for Rs 8,000 crores for relief operations in August 2007 and had to revise it to Rs. 11,000 crores subsequently as the losses mounted. The state with its own resources distributed grains to almost all the affected families for the first time in the history of Bihar but failed to follow the norms on all other counts because it did not get the desired Central aid. The Centre blamed the state for not furnishing accounts for funds already accessed and did not release further grants. Ultimately it is the people who suffer while governments squabble. Will floods ever be freed from politics?

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