

FLOOD MANAGEMENT

Let the Rivers Flow

[An acclaimed authority on cause-effect relationships of floods, Dr Dinesh Kumar Mishra, convenor of Barh Mukti Abhiyan, has virtually spent better part of his life wading through the sprawling river basins of flood-ravaged north Bihar to get a first-hand account of not only the nature of floods and associated human misery but also the politics behind it. In his factually accurate biographies of all the major rivers, Dr Mishra has delineated the contours of the manmade crises that have remained privy to engineers but at an incredible cost to the unsuspecting masses. His contention is that rivers should be allowed to flow freely and by constructing embankments, planners have only aggravated the risk and severity of floods. The political economics of floods, he laments, may never allow the annual ritual of floods' havoc to be seen beyond the relief syndrome.

A walking encyclopedia on Bihar floods, Dr Mishra is always on the move 'to learn more about the rivers and floods' and to write his observations. An excellent communicator with a flair for poetry and Urdu shayari, he quotes extensively from the ancient scriptures and has innumerable anecdotes to share. Though this IIT Kharagpur alumnus, who sacrificed family life and career to better understand behaviour of rivers, was busy giving finishing touches to yet another biography on river Bagmati, he readily responded to the queries put forth by d-sector team in his own inimitable style. Excerpts:]

- Q. In your three decades of work in understanding and chronicling the human induced floods in the north Bihar rivers including Kosi, what has been the essential message that you think the planners and politicians have missed out and still continue to do so?
- A. The planners and engineers have contempt against the people living within the flood plains for centuries and treat them as 'laymen'. If floods or the rivers' behavior had been problematic the way the engineers believe they are, all the people living within the flood plains would have migrated to Rajasthan or Rayalseema. There is no dialogue between the self-professed experts and the so-called 'laymen' who live and grow along the river and can predict the river behavior with reasonable accuracy without any gadget. Unfortunately, the 'laymen' do not possess the computing skills of the engineers and the engineers lack experience of living with rivers. The 'laymen' in turn, doubt the moves of the engineers as mischievous and the mistrust between the two is a reality. Unless the trust is built up, and that is only possible through regular dialogues between the two, no tangible result would be possible.
- Q. Will there be a time when the suffering masses within and outside the jacketed rivers rise up to make them understand it?
- A. The possibility of masses taking up the issue with engineers and planners reminds me of the story about a monkey and two cats. The monkey will ensure that the cats continue to fight with each other, while pretending to solve their dispute over share he could eat the full loaf. The planners have successfully split the people among those living on the countryside of the embankments and those living on the riverside. Their interests appear contradictory and the establishment has the last laugh as the two groups would never be allowed to resolve their differences. Unless these victims of travesty of technology and politics realize that they are being taken for a ride, their condition would not improve. As of today, they have been systematically cheated by the politicians, engineers and the contractors' nexus and are a resigned lot. They will retaliate the day they realize they have nothing to loose.

Q. One would have expected the engineers to understand you better as you are one of them and speak their language but that doesn't seem to be the case so far. Can the subject of civil or water engineering be more empathetic to the concerns you have raised or will it remain an unrealised wish?

A. Engineers speak the language of the rulers. The British establishment decried embankments, their engineers supported their views. The establishment of independent India projected embankments as saviour of the people living in flood plains; its engineers soon discovered virtues in the embankments. The engineers are employed by rulers and not by egg plants like us.

However, if I had no hope, I wouldn't have devoted my life for the people living in the flood plains. Some day the engineering establishment would realize that I was right. Many of them do it even now but after the office hours.

Q. Has your single status got anything to do with your romance for the rivers?

A. A single person's sentiments, passions and curiosity remain intact and do not fade with time. This must be getting reflected within the society in some form or the other. For a romantic person only the object changes, rest everything remains the same.

Q. Why would you not romance 'Boodhi Gandak' or for that matter 'Brahmaputra'?

A. I find it objectionable when the adjectives of 'boorhi' (old) or 'mara' (dead) or 'chharan' (abandoned) are used in context of rivers. These words kill the charm that the rivers are known to possess. Try using these words for your family members and see where you land up. These words may lead you to respect, condole or sympathize with someone but never to love. Brahmaputra is known as Baba (Grandfather) and suffers from the same complex. Talking about Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Narayani, Malini, Kosi, Nanda, Sunanda, Padma, Soni, Dhauri, Kali, Kapila, Bhargavi, Cauvery or Chandrabhaga etc takes you to a different world altogether.

Q. Would you say that the society that doesn't value its rivers doesn't respect its women too?

A. I think we are the only nation that has assigned gender to rivers. For others, it is just a matter of grammatical convenience. Traditionally, we have said a lot in honour of women but in practice our actions have always been questionable. Of late, we have started taking our rivers for a ride. Earlier we used to praise them that bathing in a particular river (snana), drinking its water (pana), paying respect by visiting it (darshana) or even remembering some of them (dhyana) was enough for salvation. All that is gone and our rivers have turned into cesspools. I would not suggest drawing a parallel between women and rivers in the context and leave it to others to contemplate.

Q. Which of the characters in river folktales resemble you the most?

A. Humayun, the Mughal emperor, after his defeat to Sher Shah in battle near Chausa, was running away from his enemies when his horse fell into river Ganga and he was nearly drowned when a Bhishti (a person assigned to carry water in leather bags) rescued him. When the emperor was successfully dragged out of river by the poor water carrier, Humayun promised his saviour that for one day he will offer the throne to him for his courageous act and faithfulness. Humayun fulfilled his promise and the Bhishti, during his one day reign, started a currency made out of leather. If you ever come across an autobiography titled "The Leather Coin", it would be written by me.

Q. Does it bother you that the world remembers you only when the rivers are in spate?

A. Not at all. Barsaat ka mausam to leharane ka mausam hai (The rainy season is to enjoy). It is better to be remembered by all and sundry when it is raining and the rivers are in the best of their glory. That gives you energy for the rest of the year. I am sought when the engineers who construct embankments and dams fail. But then, hamara choona lagane walon se kya muqabila? (I am not among those engineers who dupe the system while pretending to build infrastructure.)

Q. How do you describe your ultimate goal?

A. This is the most difficult question to answer. Millions of people tried to find the correct answer and were not satisfied with their efforts, if not failed. Poet Iqbal had written what is appropriate to most of us. He said:

"Zindagi insaan ki maanind murghe khush nawaan, Shaakh par baitha koi din chahchahaya, ud gaya." (Life of a person is like a bird sitting over the trunk of a tree chirping sweetly for some days and then it flies away.)