

Shameful media under-reporting of *Pralay*

Soroor Ahmed

It is a *Pralay* (Doomsday or *Qiyamat*), said the grim-faced Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar, after an aerial survey of the flood-devastated districts of Bihar. Railway Minister Lalu Yadav dubbed it as *Maha-Parlay*. Thus it is certainly difficult for anyone to figure out the real death toll in *Pralay*.



But if you might have tuned to any national television channel or browsed through any newspaper, vernacular or English, printed from Bihar—not to speak outside—between August 18 and 26 it would have appeared as if it is business as usual. Why bother about the flood in Bihar, which is now an annual feature? Perhaps this was the impression, which the gentlemen in the media wanted to give. Barring Bhagalpur edition of a couple of Hindi dailies none of the newspaper bothered to highlight the intensity of the *Pralay*. And apart from Sahara Bihar and ETV Bihar no other national channel deemed it fit to give it proper coverage. The silver lining is that the Urdu newspapers printed from Patna, otherwise not appreciated for anything worthwhile, gave more prominence to the Kosi devastation than many English and Hindi dailies.

However, it was only on August 27 that both the national dailies and television channels woke up to realize the magnitude of the destruction caused by the deluge, which swept away thousands of people of both Nepal as well as India. Even premier English dailies with editions in Patna gave three to four column coverage, mostly in inside pages before August 27, that is, the 10th day of the catastrophe. The breach in Kosi in fact occurred on the intervening night to August 17-18.

In this age of information technology it took full seven days for an English newspaper—The Times of India (August 24)—to have a Saharsa dateline story which said that as high as 2,000 people might have lost their lives or are traceless. Though this was a conservative estimate and it is feared that many more people might have perished there was no follow up of the story next day in that newspaper. Only Sahara Bihar channel the following day showed photos of swollen corpses which, according to its reporter, may cause epidemic.

As if the killing of at least 2,000 people—it is feared even more—do not make any national news our Patna-based media was more interested in all sorts of news, from Kashmir to Beijing, rather than highlighting *Pralay*.

The national, or even the regional media, woke up only after the railway minister, Lalu Yadav—obviously for political reason—started raising the voice forcefully in Delhi to seek Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's attention. Thus had he not raised the issue the country's worst flood in about a century would not have got proper media attention.

The tragedy is that all this happened at the time when politicians of other states, mostly of ruling party, use media to inflate the death toll of natural tragedy like earthquake—or even flood—to seek more and more central as well as international aid. If what happened on August 17-18 night in river Kosi on India-Nepal border is really a natural catastrophe and not man-made tragedy than what are we hiding and why are we blaming Nepal, which too lost a large number of its citizens? True many in sovereign Nepal do not like the existence of Indian barrage in their territory, which is obviously looked after by government of Bihar engineers, yet to say that Nepal releases water every year is an excellent falsehood consciously perpetrated by the administration of Bihar as this is the best

way to save their skin. Poor ill-informed journalists keep parroting this absolute nonsense only to expose how shallow their knowledge about things, which they report, is.

Make it very clear, it is the Indian engineers, precisely Bihari, who release water, be it from Kosi barrage or Gandak barrage near Valmikinagar across West Champaran. And this time there was no question of releasing water. The water of Kosi breached the embankment raised by the Indian engineers more than five decades back.

If we in the media in Bihar would not highlight the Parlay will somebody else come from Mars to do so. How would we create Bihari lobby and seek genuine central as well international help. But the real tragedy, no less than the breach in embankment, is that we in the media in the state are more interested in politics rather than reporting.

Lastly, flood experts-cum-activists like Dinesh Kumar Mishra, Prabhat Kumar Shandilya, Ranjeev, Hemant, Safdar Imam Quadri, Anil Prakash and many others stand vindicated today. When earlier they used to warn us against, what they say, the outdated technology of dam and embankment, they were dubbed by the same establishment as the agent of America, who are against the development of India. Thank God, it is only the embankment which got breached and not the barrage, which collapsed.

*(The author is a Patna-based free-lance journalist).

A Flood of Tears in Bihar

Manuwant Choudhary

A flood of tears.... as the river of sorrow Kosi swallows 1598 villages and some 2.7 million people are marooned, officially 12 days after the disaster only 200,000 persons have been rescued to safety.

The above figures are from the National Disaster Management which has woken up to the tragedy after 11 days and only after India's Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh declared the floods a national calamity offering a thousand crores for flood and relief work.



If you've been watching television you would perhaps not have seen such a human tragedy for basic survival beforevictims carry a single box on their heads and wade through water without food or water and while they walk you can even see a tear in their eye.

And soon after the floods being declared a national calamity, only yesterday a large advertisement in a national newspaper announced the chief minister's main program of the day...a *Khel Yojna* program for sportspersons perhaps competing with India's President Pratibha Patil who had her own program for sports awardees in New Delhi.

So while Nitish says its *pralaya*, Ram Vilas Paswan says its *Mahapralaya* and Laloo says it's a Tsunami!

But only 1491 boats are taking people to safety and for Bihar's politicians its business as usual.

Even after an all-party meeting they are not telling their people why they have failed.

The river Kosi shifts 120 kms and floods heavily populated districts in Bihar in the middle of the night.