Report of the JNUSU Team’s Third Visit for Bihar Flood Relief Work

On August 18, the Kosi river breached its western constraining embankment near Kusaha village in Nepal and flooded Madhepura, Supaul, Saharsa, Purnea and Araria districts in Bihar rendering nearly 2.5 million people homeless. Due to continued neglect and delays in repair work, embankments had outlived their useful life. Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union (JNUSU) has reached in different areas with relief materials three times. We present here the report of our third visit.

Impact of the Flood: An Overview

The six member team of Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union (JNUSU) for Bihar flood relief reached with 1304 blankets and other relief materials at Katihar railway station from Delhi on 1st December 2008. On the same day we reached Purnia from where our local contact immediately took us to Jorgama village of Murliganj Block in Madhepura district (located at Meerganj chowk of the highway connecting Purnia and Madhepura townships) where Musahar, the most backward Muslim community in Bihar live. This is one of the areas which experienced the most disastrous impacts of the flood. Nearly 32 people from this very village lost their life¹ in a single boat accident. Bridges, culverts and roads got fully damaged and people were left with no means of transportation. All sections of people both rich and poor were equally affected. The loss of food grains, clothing, and other belongings were rampant. The pace and intensity of the flood was such that people could not find time to take their belongings to safe places. Many of the people were not able to occupy their homes even after three months of flood. Some of the settlements got converted into riverbeds (picture1). We spent three days in Jorgama and Rampur panchayats of Madhepura District. We crossed Baluwaha River on boat as the Bridge was badly damaged—the bridge which was the only means of communication between Terasi and Tapratola villages of Rampur panchayat and Jorgama panchayat. These villages were converted into river beds. Villagers have been living at the embankment of the Beldor Canal since the day of flood (Picture 7). The Baluwah river was small channel of the Kosi river system before the flood but today this river runs in full capacity (Picture 6).

¹ Media report  
http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Bihar_32_drown_as_rescue_boat_capsizes/articleshow/3423829.cms
The overview of the impact of the flood presented in this section is largely based on our experiences in these two panchayats as we spent relatively more time there and did not have the opportunity to spend more time in the other two districts i.e., Purnea and Supaul at the team’s third visit.

As the photographs would suggest, no relief work has reached to rehabilitate the affected people or provide them with alternative shelter. People are left without any proper shelter in such grave winter. As a result, many old people have died as the cold went more and more severe. Winter has become harsher for them as the wind blowing across the muddy and moistly open grounds got chillier. Local media has reported at least seven deaths in the flood affected areas of Madhepura district. Land is not yet ready for farming activities as it is still quite muddy even though the water has receded. Some of the lands have even become swampy (marshy). Therefore there is no work for any agricultural worker in the area.
On the other hand, no mass scale public works programme has been started by the government, which is very badly needed in this area as the flood has destroyed roads, bridges, culverts and other pathways. The lack of any such initiative by the government has compelled people to make their own temporary arrangements for commuting within and outside villages. Bamboo bridges, called *chachri* in local language, have been built by people as water is still present in and around the village (Picture 5). This means that there is no source of employment for flood victims. Moreover, those who could migrate to major urban centers like Delhi are facing burnt of the global economic crisis. In the absence of any employment opportunity, the only source of living for these flood victims is relief materials and to make the things worse people have been forced to move out of the relief camps started by the government, which were started with the promise to keep it running for the whole year.
The situation of the people’s misery is so gruesome/intense that they jump onto the (any kind of) vehicle if they come to know that it is carrying relief material. Therefore, on our arrival, our local contact suggested us to remove the banner of JNUSU relief work that we had put on our vehicle and we choose to travel in the secrecy of the night so that relief material could reach the place where nothing had reached till then.

The tragedy is that this devastating flood is not just a nature’s fury but a story of neglect and delays compounded by the embankments that had outlived their given life. It is well known that embankments in Nepal urgently needed repair work but nothing was done and this resulted in an erosion of the embankment at Kusaha village, some 12kms upstream in Nepal. Whenever we got into discussion with the local people we tried to highlight this fact. Our approach was to motivate victims to raise voices and demand their rights of relief and rehabilitation from the government which has already been announced time and again in media.
People of Tapratola and Terasi village (Under water now, see right picture) living on embankment of the Beldor Canal.

**Reality of the Government Relief Programme: Story of another disaster**

The Kosi flood is one of the biggest disasters that the country experienced in recent time. Both the government of Bihar and the union government announced many relief measures for the millions of victims. The Central government declared the flood a ‘national calamity’. In spite of this, the first relief to reach the villages visited by us, was still in the process of distribution and had not reached to all/majority of the affected even after three and half months of the ‘national calamity’ declaration. This was a relief package of Rs. 2250 and 100kg of grain (50kg Rice + 50kg wheat) for each family. Mukhia(head of the panchayat) and respective ward members of the Gram panchayat( representative of a respective wards (village) under that panchayat) is responsible for making the list of Beneficiaries in any particular panchayat. This gives rise to corruption and favouratism. It has been reported by the flood victims that panchayat officials asked for bribes to the tune Rs. 200 to 300, in order to get their names added in the beneficiary list. Besides, the mandated amount of money and the grain did not reach fully to the victims. The grains received by the victims were usually less in weight by around 10 to 15kgs. This 10-15kgs of food grains and probably some money as well goes to the private coffers of the corrupt government officials. At the government distribution centre we did not see any weighing machine to make sure that beneficiary was getting right quantity though beneficiaries were asked to put their signatures to accept that they have received 50kgs of Rice and 50kgs of wheat (Picture 8). In some cases, the beneficiaries were getting only wheat instead of rice and wheat both. The government employees at the distribution centre told us that they couldn’t do anything about it as higher authorities had provided them with wheat only.
People have no idea what will they eat after this stock of food grain gets over as the government has not yet announced the second round of distribution of the food grains. Latest announcement for second round came on 2\textsuperscript{nd} January 2009 for Rs 1990 per family but no food grain. In the absence of any source of wage, they are totally dependent on the aids that were announced by the government. But instead of continued announcement by the government to provide aid, it has closed relief camps and has forcefully removed people from them. In ward no 10 of the Jorgama panchayat (Naya Tola) almost 32 people died in single boat accident including an army person as mentioned earlier in this report. But the government is still looking for the proof (postmortem report) that they are dead. It is nothing but a cruel joke with the families of the dead that the government wants the bodies of the people who were swept away in the flood. The families could not even do the cremation or funeral of their dead relatives, since the bodies were not found. Government considers them as missing. And as per the rule of the government, a missing person can be considered dead only if she/he does not comeback within 3 years. Therefore, the government will be able to compensate such families only after three years. We could meet the families of those who have lost their family members in this particular accident. They have not received any help as promised by the government of Bihar.
Similarly, in case somebody wants to seek compensation against the loss of their cattle, she/he has to produce the doctor’s report on reason for the death and photo of the cattle. Compensation announced by the government on account of agricultural loss has been scaled down from Rs 45000/Hectare to mere Rs 4000/Hectare. In addition, it is not clear what will happen to those who are sharecroppers or landless agricultural workers whose livelihood depends solely on the land which they cultivated. When government wanted them to evacuate from the flood affected region it gave the slogan of “Jan hai to Jahan hai” i.e., ‘leave everything, save your life’, adding also that ‘the government will take care of you’. But today the government is making a gag of the people claiming for compensation for any kind of loss by making it conditional upon production of proofs that are impossible to meet by the victims who have lost every document and proof along with their houses in flood. And in any case, no one keeps photos of their cattle and there is no question of medical report as the cattle died in the flood.

The government promised to provide 6 liters of Kerosene for every three months since floods for each family but no victim on record has got this and three months of flood has already passed. Medical prevention and treatment materials have not reached the flood victims even now.

The irony is that all this is happening after the government’s declaration of the flood in Bihar as ‘a national calamity’. On 27th of August the Prime Minister of India called it ‘a national calamity’ and announced immediate assistance of Rs10 billion and 125,000 tonnes of food grains to the government of Bihar for rescue and relief operations. The relief operation of the government can only be explained by the phrase “promised a dream but delivered a nightmare”.

Thus majority of the funds that are released from the government coffers have been siphoned off by the executive authorities. In fact, this flood has made many riches at the cost of the many lives of flood victims. The story goes up to the level of sexual abuse of women victims of the flood\(^2\). Such inhuman and incompetent government officials probably will never be punished. Our investigation shows that it is a clear case where corrupt officials/ministers push people in deprivation because of their indifferent and careless attitude towards people. Later they release funds to help the same group of people. But funds released for the purpose never reaches people but to the corrupt officials. This repeated ignorance and apathy on the part of the government machinery has left people extremely powerless and marginalized. On the other hand, some powerful people in the area have managed to grab quite a lot of relief materials with their political or muscle power. One old man

\(^2\) Media report  
http://indiatoday.digitaltoday.in/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14782&sectionid=36&Itemid=1&issu eid=86
told us that in some cases animals are eating food that are meant for humans while human beings are starving. To quote the old man who is a victim himself: “yahan Bhains sattu pi rahai hai aur Bakri chuda kha rahi hai” i.e., ‘here Buffalos are drinking sattu (powder of roasted grams usually used as food item in the area) and goats are eating beaten rice’ (another item for human consumption). This also reflects the dangerous divisions that society has created and the lack of sensitiveness, cooperation and assistance among people.

**Description of Relief Work:**

We reached the flood affected areas with threefold objective – to understand the situation of the population affected by the people, to assess the relief programme of the government of Bihar and to help those who could not be reached till now. By the morning of 1st December 2008, we reached Katihar railway station and by the evening of the same day we started our work in Jorgama panchayat in Madhepura district. The six member JNUSU team remained busy all along till 7th of December

**Working Strategy:**

We requested local villagers to give us the names of those people who deserve the relief materials at priority in the presence of other villagers so that any mistake could be immediately corrected. We roamed around the villages with local youths to get an idea about the level of disaster that had taken place. We had brought 100 saris, 200 tents and some 1300 blankets with us, rather a very small quantity of relief material considering the scale of damage in the area. We gave priority to old people, widows and those who lost all their belongings with home due to speedy currents of the flood. Local people suggested us the names of individuals who were in dire need of help. We distributed coupons to those suggested by villagers who could later produce them at the relief distribution centre and receive the relief materials.

**Reaching people: Travel plan**

The trip started on 1st December 2008 from Katihar Station. We hired a mini truck (Picture 9). We reached Purnia by the evening and unloaded the relief materials. Purnea was supposed to be our nodal point to cover the three districts, Purnea, Madhepura and Supaul. We reached Jorgama village in Madhepura district with relief materials by 8PM. We worked in Jorgama and Rampur panchayats till the evening of 3rd December. Then we moved back to Purnea to load relief materials for the Supaul district. Supaul is very close to Purnea in normal days but due to damage of Bulwah river (Picture 6) we had to drive whole night. On 4th Morning we reached Supaul town where we distributed relief materials to the villagers who had come for protest demonstration in front of the
office of District Magistrate. Here also youngsters of the respective villages helped us in the list of beneficiaries on the basis of the criteria mentioned above. On 5th morning we reached Madhepura district headquarter to observe another protest demonstration. On the morning of 6th December we started covering villages in Purnea. The trip came to an end by the evening of 7th December. We used a mini truck (Picture 9) for carrying the relief material and travel. It was quite comfortable to sit on the blankets loaded in the truck. It was the fastest as well as the cheapest option to mange the trip. In addition to this the driver of the truck Mr. Munna understood our purpose and gave us company all along till the end of the trip. Because of this during all this time he could not go back to his home (in Katihar). We will ever be grateful to him for this favour.

Areas Covered

Madhepura District

Jorgama and Rampur panchayts of Murliganj Block were comprehensively covered as these are worst affected regions.
Pokhram village in Pokhram Parmanadpur panchayat (dominated by Mushars and Santhal Tribals)
Slums areas of Madhepura Township.

Supaul District

Madhubani village of patapganj Block
Jadia village of Triveniganj Block
Rajeswari village of Chatapur block

Purnia District

Panchayats covered in Banbankhi Block

1. Kosisaran → villages jagdishpur, deottar,
2. Mahadevpur → villages Bhudiagola, Donghabitta, Mahadevpur
3. Bahora → villages Saraswati, Rupaspur, Haipur, Bahora
4. Malinia → village Malinia

Panchayats in Bararakothi Block

1. Nathpur → villages Parvatta, Godiari, Sirsia
2. Laxmipur → village laxmipur

Panchayats in Knagar Block

1. Ganeshpur → village Ganeshpur
2. Sahara → village Amarapur
Panchayats in Dhamda Block
Rangpur East and Rangpur West → Villages Bagwa, Molaghat, pahartol

Table: Relief Materials distributed district wise (in numbers)

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<th>Supaul</th>
<th>Purnea</th>
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We would like to thank all those people who contributed generously to this cause specially the organizers of the Charity Dinner at The Hague, The Netherlands on 4th of October 2008 and contributors at Hyderabad, India. We were not only able help some of the victims but it was also a learning opportunity for all of us. We would look forward to further contributions as we realise that the amounts of material were quite less from what was needed. Please go to http://zakku78.wordpress.com/ for comprehensive coverage of JNUSU’s previous relief work and related news and also http://picasaweb.google.co.in/zakaria.jnu/BiharFlood?feat=directlink for pictures.