Kosi Floods: A Cycle of Disaster and Resilience in North Bihar

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The Kosi River, often referred to as the “Sorrow of Bihar” due to its destructive floods, originates in the Himalayas and flows through Nepal into Northern Bihar, India. Its unpredictable course and heavy sediment load make it one of India’s most flood-prone rivers. In September and October 2024, multiple embankment breaches led to devastating floods across several districts, including Supaul district in Northern Bihar. This, however, was not an isolated incident, as the riverine community is exposed to annual flooding in the region. To understand the damage, the state's interventions, and the community’s resilience, I have been engaging with various villages affected by floods, most recently in September 2025. This piece explores how the river’s natural behaviour and flawed flood control policies have turned floods into a pathological yet normalised part of life for the riverine community, and how the riverine community makes life possible.

The River’s Unpredictable Nature

The Kosi River’s path is never fixed. In one year, it may inundate certain villages; in another, it shifts course, depositing vast sediments from the Himalayas. In January 2025, I saw one stream of the Kosi flowing close to the Eastern Kosi Embankment in Supaul. 9 months later, by September 2025, as shown in Picture 1, the river stream had nearly dried up, leaving a vast expanse of sand and silt. Logs of wood, carried downstream from the Himalayas, were piled along the bank, a testament to the river’s shifting moods. This unpredictability shapes the region’s landscape and the lives of its people.

Picture 1: Drying river and sedimentation near the Eastern Kosi Embankment

Picture 2 reveals a landscape crisscrossed by small streams, a patchwork of sediment and water. Together, these images capture the Kosi region's signature: a dynamic, flood-prone area where the river's shifting course dictates the fate of homes, fields, and livelihoods. The uncertainty of the river's path drives seasonal migration, as families lose their homestead and agricultural land to erosion or flooding and need to seek work elsewhere.

Picture 2: Sediment deposited by the river

Community Resilience Amid Crisis

Picture 3: A young boy collecting logs of wood from the flowing river

Picture 4: Dismantled homes along the roadside after the floods

Despite the river's destruction, the people of the region adapt with remarkable resilience. During my visit, I met a 60-year-old farmer whose family has lived by the Kosi for generations. "The river takes our land, but it also gives," he said, pointing to the logs his son collected from the river. These small acts of survival highlight the community's ingenuity.

In Picture 3, a boy stands knee-deep in the Kosi, gathering logs swept down from the mountains. As the river slows in the plains, these logs become a vital resource for the remote region, where roads are scarce and cooking gas delivery is unreliable and possibly unaffordable. Families dry and store the wood for firewood, a lifeline in a region with limited energy access.

The 2024 floods eroded entire villages, forcing residents to dismantle their homes—often made of bamboo and mud for easy reassembly—and move to safer ground. Picture 4 shows these temporary structures scattered along a roadside, their thatched roofs and wooden frames a symbol of adaptability in the face of loss. A young man in his 20s told me his family rebuilt their home three times in a decade, each time farther from the flood's reach.

The Failure of Embankments

Since the 1950s and 1960s, when India's post-independence development prioritised large-scale mega hydraulic infrastructure, embankments were built along the Kosi to control floods, provide for irrigation and produce hydroelectric power. Embankments, however, have worsened flooding by trapping sediment, raising riverbeds, and causing drainage congestion, prolonged inundation, and increased flood intensity, leaving riverside communities vulnerable.

Picture 5: Sandbags stacked along the riverbank to prevent erosion

The tricky part of imagining embankments as a flood-control solution is that they demand regular maintenance as they are perpetually threatened by the river. Picture 5 shows sandbags piled along the embankment, a desperate attempt to protect it from the river's force. This is crucial since the embankments have allowed large-scale infrastructural 'development' in the countryside, the allegedly flood-protected area. In case of any breach of the embankment, the scale of loss of lives and property will be huge. Hence, the Water Resource Department invests heavily in defending these structures, with Bihar spending crores of rupees annually on embankment maintenance. Yet, breaches remain a reality—over 9 major breaches have occurred since the construction of the embankments on the Kosi. The state's focus remains on preserving infrastructure and the countryside population, often ignoring the roughly one million people living on the riverside within the embankments. These communities face regular inundation and erosion, their agricultural land—their primary livelihood—swallowed by the Kosi.

The State's Contradictory Role

Picture 6: Makeshift homes on spurs were bulldozed by the district administration

The government's response to the Kosi floods reveals a paradox: oppressive actions coexist with limited welfare efforts, leaving communities caught between neglect and aid. When floods erode their land, families often squat on spurs—earthen structures almost perpendicular to embankments meant to divert the river—or on the embankments themselves. Local authorities typically tolerate this, recognising the residents' plight and moral claims of the flood victims. But Picture 6 captures a rare and harsh moment: district officials bulldozing makeshift homes on spurs, leaving families with nowhere to go.

In contrast, Picture 7 shows a state-run community kitchen, supposed to provide meals to flood victims. Bihar's Disaster Management Department outlines such relief protocol in its Standard Operating Procedure, promising food, shelter, and medical aid, among other things. Yet, delivery often falls short—kitchens run out of supplies, and aid reaches only a fraction of the flood victims, a major chunk of public provisioning siphoned off by intermediaries and responsible officials, politicians and contractors. This gap between policy and reality deepens the community's precarity.

Picture 7: A community kitchen for flood victims in Supaul

A Pathological Normal

The Kosi floods, once framed by the state as a disaster, have become a normalised part of life, woven into the region's social and economic fabric. The state's flood control measures, particularly embankments, have not only failed to protect communities but have made their lives more precarious. By prioritising infrastructure over people, these policies have eroded agricultural livelihoods, triggering large-scale seasonal migration. The existence of tools like the Standard Flood Calendar, which predicts flood seasons, shows how floods are no longer exceptional but expected, a destructive cycle embedded in community life.

This normalisation comes at a cost. By ignoring the Kosi's natural behaviour and the traditional wisdom of riverine communities, who once "lived with floods", the state has disrupted the delicate balance between people and their environment. The result is a region impoverished both ecologically and socially.

Looking Forward

The Kosi floods raise urgent questions: Can flood management prioritise people over infrastructure? Could policies incorporate traditional knowledge to reduce vulnerability? Engaging riverine communities in designing solutions could break the cycle of destruction and displacement, offering a path toward resilience that respects both the river and its people.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)

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