

TOWARDS A RICHER UNDERSTANDING OF KOSI RIVER FLOODS IN BIHAR, INDIA: DEPLOYING ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Available literature suggests what we construe as disaster called flood is a design problem embedded in our developmentality with respect to natural resources like water (Mishra 1997; D'Souza 2006). Once water is treated as an externally existing neutral object, science and technology paves way for social engineering of nature (Lahiri-Dutt, 2020). Rochefort and Cobb explain how and why issues come to be defined in different ways, how these definitions are expressed in the world of politics, and what consequences these definitions have for government action and agenda-setting dynamics (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994). The paper utilizes the framework of "politics of disaster" in studying the case of Kosi river flood in Bihar, India. The moments of disasters though reveal the contradictions within social, economic and political functioning of a society, surprisingly it also becomes a moment to further entrench those institutions and perpetuate the development patterns that created the disaster in the first place (Barrios, 2017). The impact of the disaster in the society is dictated by its socio-cultural matrix viz. caste, class, gender, and age-group, further underlining the human element in the construction, experience and response to the disaster. Oliver Smith argues that vulnerability is socially constructed and perceived (Oliver-smith, 2009). Largely, the response of the state's disaster management apparatus to the Kosi river floods has been limited to strengthening of embankments before the onset of monsoon season and post-flood relief work. On the other hand, for generations, people have been 'living with floods' (Mishra 2001). The same flood waters of river Kosi don't impact everyone equally. In his work on forced settlements also, Oliver Smith explains that migration as an adaptation measure is possible for relatively resourceful sections. The weaker sections like women, children and lower castes are condemned to suffer more materially as well as psychologically (Pritchard & Thielemans, 2014). This paper argues in favour of studying Kosi Floods from an anthropological perspective and understand it as a humanly accentuated, socio-culturally negotiated and techno-politically attempted problem and critically discusses the limitations of modern scientific and technological solutionism. Using snowball sampling, in-depth interviews were conducted with a relevant officials and scholar-activists. Focused group discussions were also conducted with the flood-affected victims. The paper argues for an epistemic plurality, shedding the infallibility of technological determinism and appreciating a more open approach towards already existing knowledge systems of coping with disasters.

KEYWORDS: Floods, Kosi, Policy, Disaster

Deep cultures of disaster: The significance of the anthropological perspective for understanding the interstices of hazards and disaster