

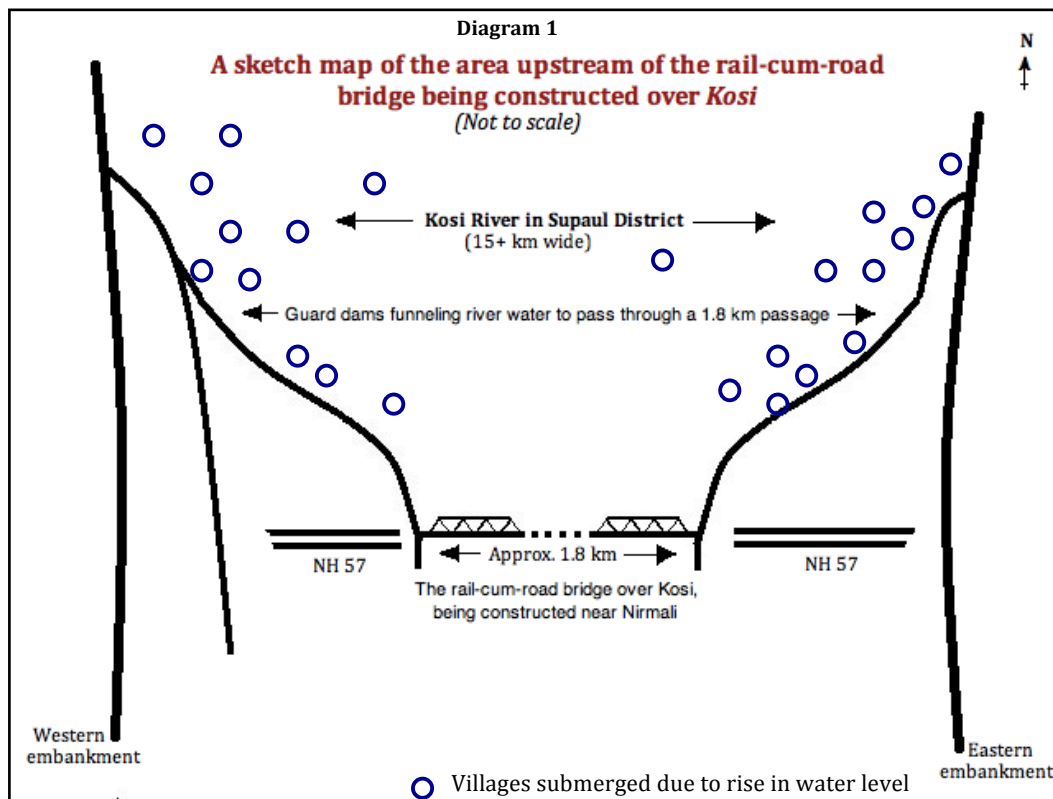
## **70,000 Lives Endangered for a Bridge over Kosi<sup>1</sup>**

### **The issue**

A pair of guard dams built inside the embankments of the Kosi river has now put at stake the survival of nearly 70,000 residents of 52 villages located in Nirmali and Saraigarh Bhaptiahi blocks of Supaul district. The structure acts as a bow-shaped funnel designed to make a 15 km wide river pass through a narrow 1.8 km passage underneath a rail-cum-road bridge being constructed at Sanpataha, Nirmali. The rise in the water level caused due to



funneling of the high intensity flows of Kosi water through the narrow passage has led to full or partial submergence of 52 villages in Nirmali and Saraigarh Bhaptiahi blocks of Supaul district in Bihar. Most of the affected villages (ref. Box 1) are located within a range of 15 km upstream from the site of the bridge. Diagram 1 presents an illustrative sketch map (not to scale) of the area upstream of the bridge.



<sup>1</sup> Based on a visit to the area by a team comprising **Narayan Jee Chowdhary** (Mithila Gram Vikas Parishad); **Anindo Banerjee** and **Jay Kumar Verma** (Praxis); **Rajkumar, Kameshwar, Ajay** and local activists.

### Box 1 – Villages severely affected by the rise in water level

In *Nirmali* block

Maura, Jhahura, Laguniya, Dangrahi, Wiprahi, Dighiya, Rahariya, Thariya and Bela Sringar Moti.

In *Saraigarh Bhaptiahi* block

Dholi, Kataiya, Baltharwa, Bhuliya, Siyani, Girdhari, Gauripatti, Bananiya, Aurhi, Seehpur, Nehalpatti, Dih San, Jhajha, Parwaha, Khapsada, Itahri, Laukaha Palar, Karhathi, Kawiyahi, Wilendri, Dharhara, Baisa, Garhiya, Bhaptiahi and Kalyanpur (the last three are partially affected).

### Current situation (August 24, 2010)

Most of the affected habitations have been abandoned by their residents, mostly belonging to scheduled castes, minorities and OBCs. Thousands of affected villagers have fled their respective villages and taken refuge on the highways and embankments at various places. Some have moved to villages that are not fully submerged yet, e.g. Bananiya, which is also providing refuge to people from Aurhi village. Hundreds of habitations are lying



fully submerged under water, e.g. six wards of Saraigarh *panchayat*, which include Itarhi village. Nearly every household has someone or the other down with fever, Diarrhea or other water-borne diseases. ***No relief has been provided to people marooned in the villages, who are facing acute starvation and surviving with great difficulty.*** Supply of PDS commodities has been completely stalled in the area for several months. With the Govt. of Bihar declaring all the 38 districts to be

drought-affected and with the electoral code of conduct likely to be imposed any day in the run-up to the elections to the legislative assembly, people have little hopes of receiving any support from the government!

### Box 2 – Lives lost within a month – a count from Bhuliya, one of the affected villages

As many as two pregnant women (Asha Devi, w/o Kripanand; and Sarita Devi, w/o Devnarayan) lost their lives during the last month in Bhuliya village of Dholli *panchayat*, due to being cut off from any mode of transport to the nearest health centre on the day of delivering their first babies. In the same village, 11-year old Chandni Kumari drowned under water while going to attend the call of nature.

Premonitions of being wiped away weigh heavy in the minds of the inhabitants of the area. The submergence of the 52 villages came about at a moderate discharge of around 1.5 lakh cusecs of water through the Kosi barrage in Nepal, which is less than a fifth of the peak rate of discharge through the barrage. According to villagers, the situation

wasn't so grim even in 1969 when over 9 lakh cusecs of water had been discharged through the barrage. Now with the guard dams subjecting them to face sudden spurts in water level, they have no option but to make up their minds to move away to other areas, abandoning their community relationships, legacies of the past and household resources!

### **Larger issues**

The rail-cum-road project was sanctioned and initiated without any assessment of social, human or environmental costs of the bridge. Although a technical assessment was carried out, it doesn't even mention the name of any human habitation falling in the course of the river. Several of the assumptions and projections made in the technical assessment have already proved to be faulty, e.g. those relating to the estimated surge in the water level. Needless to say, neither any sections of local communities or elected local representatives were consulted before or during the process of construction of the guard dams, nor was any compensation ever offered to them! Even basic information regarding the likely implications of construction of the dams was denied to them.

The most critical issue relates to accountability for any probable calamities caused by the guard dams in future. Inhabitants of the area, mostly illiterate, labour-dependent rural people, know that a catastrophe has already been scripted and thrust upon them without their consent. However, it's difficult for them to reverse the decisions taken or to change the course of things. If a calamity were to occur in future, no one is likely to be held accountable!

The injustice comes as a double blow to people, who have been forced to live with floods for nearly sixty years, since the Kosi embankments were constructed. For over three generations, people have been deprived of due compensation for their losses and successive governments have been treating the area enclosed between the embankments as virtually a no man's land, despite its occupancy by over a million inhabitants of 380 villages, fragmented across multiple electoral constituencies and thus not forming a vote bank large enough to interest the political class!

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For seeing more photographs of the submerged areas, visit -

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/43483779@N03/sets/72157624809674202/detail/>