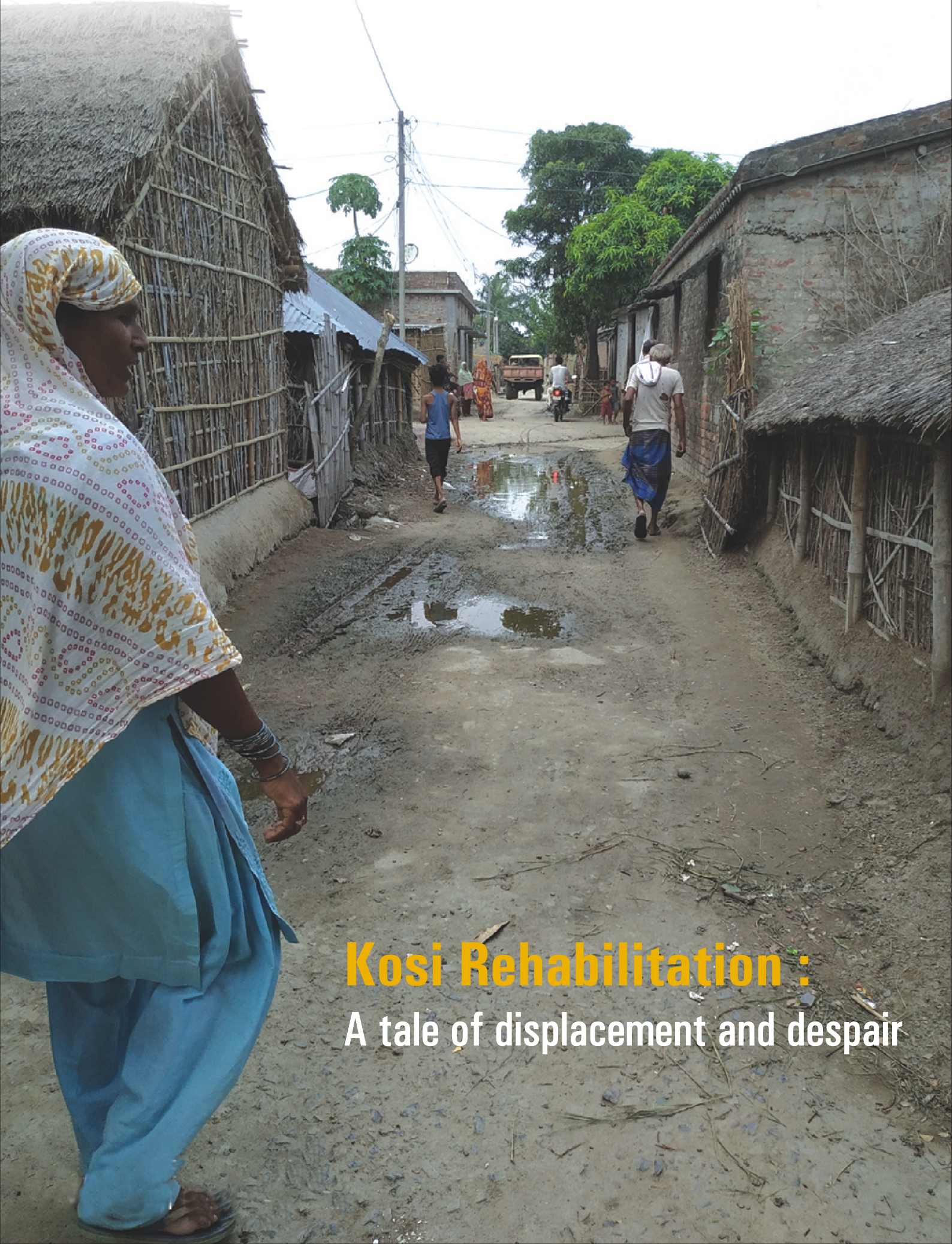


CASE STUDY

August 2020



Kosi Rehabilitation : A tale of displacement and despair

The villages trapped between the two embankments constructed on both sides of the Kosi River, were caught in no man's land. The population affected was not in hundreds or thousands, but in lakhs, and for them the biggest problem was to save their primary source of livelihood, their agricultural land. It is a well-accepted fact by the people living here that every year their fields will be battered by floods, their produce ruined, their homes flooded and their families displaced. But the people then were confident that the government would understand their predicament and ensure that their needs were fulfilled. Aware of the hardships faced by the community in this area, the government had decided to relocate the affected people. An initial survey conducted found that there were 304 villages located within the embankments with a population of 1.92 lakh whose total landholdings were 2,60,108 acres or 1,05,307 hectares. Dinesh Kumar Mishra, in his book '*Dui Paatan Ke Beech*' puts the villages tally at 380, spread over four districts and thirteen blocks, with a population of 9.88 lakh, as per the 2001 census.

The government further promised the villages inside the embankment many things- Flood free land outside the embankment area for rehabilitation, with proper schools, roads, ponds and wells, loans for building houses and transport to travel inside the embankment to their fields. Unfortunately, rehabilitation was a slow and painful process. Families were granted land for



rehabilitation, but no steps were taken to ensure their livelihoods.

And so, very few families actually moved out to the newly allotted areas. Till 1970, only 6650 families had shifted out to settle in these areas. As per the Public Accounts Committee, Bihar Assembly, between 1958 and 1962, 12,084 families were allotted land outside the embankment, and were awarded Rs 16.73 lakh as a first instalment to help them build their new homes. Today, the government has no records to clarify how many families were rehabilitated or how many continue to live inside the embankment areas. As per the *Dainik Bhaskar* newspaper dated 25th June, 2019, 39527 households of Supaul and Saharsa districts were displaced due to the embankment construction, of which 33368 families have been rehabilitated in the allotted areas. There are still 6199 families who have not been rehabilitated as yet. This report further adds that there are still one and a half lakh people from 160 villages inside the embankment, who lead a life of displacement. A survey carried out further states that the populace of 33 villages has not received any land for

resettlement. Unfortunately this particular report does not cite the data source for all this information and numbers shared.

The official in charge of Supaul rehabilitation says that as per the 28th November, 2018, project report of Kosi, 134 rehabilitation sites were demarcated in Supaul, Saharsa, Darbhanga and Madhubani districts with a total acreage of 3113.51 acres. Of these there are 47 (1139.38 acres) in Supaul, 37 (1,123 acres) in Saharsa, 16 (241.26 acres) in Darbhanga and 31 (609.11 acres) in Madhubani district.

Satyanarayan, the 65 year old *Mukhiya* of Kharail Malda, says that his father moved to this rehabilitated area in 1959. Their original village was Minahi, of Madhepur block in district Madhubani. Kharail Malda, where they were rehabilitated, is thirty kilometres east of their ancestral village. When they resettled, they did receive some financial aid to build a house in the new place. He adds that not all the people of the village moved out to the new area. Some families split, with a few moving out and the rest staying back. Many have left this place and moved out completely. For

those families who moved to rehabilitation lands, livelihood continued to be a major challenge, impacting on food availability.

Food scarcity: A reality

For the people displaced by the embankments, the rehabilitation sites demarcated were at a distance from their actual village, secluded and only suitable for residential purposes. For these predominantly agrarian communities, livelihood now became a major challenge as the people who moved to the new sites. The land given was only suitable for housing purposes, and the villagers were still dependent on their old agricultural pieces of land for making a living, and these were far away and difficult to reach. The government had promised boats for people to travel easily to their fields, but the ground situation was very different. Not only was it difficult to reach their fields, but impossible to irrigate because of the river flooding it or the excessive siltation that occurred resulting from the flooding. During floods, nothing can be

cultivated here. After the floods, wheat is sown in the higher areas, but the produce is not enough for a family to survive. In spite of this, families continue to eke out this meagre crop to be able to feed their families in such difficult circumstances.

Mohd. Amannullah speaks of how all of his land is inside the embankment area. He explains how he has to cross three tributaries of the Kosi River before he can reach his fields. During floods, there is no crop that can be grown, and after the floods recede, he has to make do with the little wheat he grows on higher land. Many of the villagers have migrated as their only source of livelihood is no longer viable. They have moved to Delhi, Punjab, and Haryana, preferring to work as farm labourers there. *“Before 2000, we cultivated wheat, corn, rice and even moong pulses, and were in an envious position”*, continues Mohd. Amanullah. *“We were displaced by floods in the year 2000, ruined completely and from kings turned into beggars overnight”*, Mohd. Alam further state that they have been working as labourers in Haryana

for the past ten years, where they earn Rs. 250 as daily labourers. They are the owners of four *bigha*¹ land, but have to make a living as a common worker in

other states. They rue that this is the case with most of the people here.

Basic development missing

Even sixty five years after the Kosi project, basic development work has not taken place in these rehabilitation areas. Barring one or two, most people who shifted here have not received anything besides land needed to build a new house. Drinking water, toilets, roads and other such essential amenities are still an issue here. Most importantly, none of the families here have legal papers that prove their ownership of the land, and hence are unable to benefit from any government scheme or bank loans.

Satyanarayan, *mukhiya*, reaffirms that the government gave residential land, nothing else. Kharail Malda village was lacking in roads, drinking water supply and toilets until 1985. Only when the village came under Supaul Municipality, did things improve for them. Today 500 families live here. Rahmaniganj Tola under the Chandel *Gram Panchayat* that lies inside the embankment area. After the floods in the year 2000, the village vanished after the Kosi River cut through its land. After this incident, 75 people from this village were rehabilitated in Ram Datt Patti, which lies on low land outside the embankment area. Every year the residents here now do earth filling so that they can continue to live on this land, which is still low lying. Added to this is the constant waterlogging that occurs here; their homes



¹ 1 *bigha* = 1.2 acres

are surrounded by patches of water the whole year round. Rain water also stands stagnant in the low lying area, as there is no place for it to flow out. The whole village appears as a lake, and no irrigation is possible in this water filled land, with the result that most people have no choice but to migrate as labourers to the neighbouring areas to earn a living. Drinking water is another major issue here, as the groundwater that people depend upon as a source for drinking water is rich in iron. All containers are lined with a thin coating when water is stored in them. Many buy drinking water at a cost of Rs 20 per jar. Mohd. Amanullah and Mohd. Salamuddin shared that there is not even one government handpump nor any piped water supply in their village. Four years back they finally got electric supply in their village, and MGNREGA² work too has begun for roads. 18 people in the village have received sanction under the PM *Awas Yojana*³, and about 20-25 have had toilets build. Primary school is there, but for further education, the children have to travel 10 kilometres further to Supaul.

Mohd. Amanullah says that they face problems regarding roads, drains, drinking water and waterlogging. Stagnant water, mosquito breeding grounds, often cause spread of diseases such as dengue, malaria, diarrhoea, and stomach ailments, all common occurrences here.

Conclusion

An assessment of the situation clarifies that after the construction of the embankments the villagers who live inside the embankment are literally trapped between the deep sea and the devil, they have a firm footing neither here nor there. Even the bare necessities of life- food, clothing and shelter, are denied to the people living here. Rehabilitation too seems to be lost under the burden of chaos, misplaced regulations and corruption. Inside the embankments there is only the river or silt laden fields. In spite of owning agricultural land, the farmers have no fields left to plough. The big landlords of yesterday are now as good as



landless, migrating to faraway places in search of livelihood. The land that once boasted of three crops every year barely manages a single crop, and that too only in a few places. The rock solid foundation for their irrigation and livelihood has been shaken, the river and its water that were once a blessing are now more a curse for the people living here today.

² The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) aims at enhancing livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

³ Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, a scheme of Govt of India, aims to fulfil the housing requirements of the rural poor