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Reimagining State and Community:

Power, Care, and Resistance in Disaster Management

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Abstract

Disasters and their management offer a rich lens for examining state and community dynamics. Critical Disaster Studies provides theoretical frameworks to unpack the state's framing and handling of disasters, while challenging monolithic conceptions of the state in its everyday practices. The dialectical interplay between state and community opens avenues to reimagine both. This paper situates the analysis in the fluvial landscape of the Indo-Nepal border, shaped by the transboundary Kosi River. It argues that the state performs a multifaceted role in Kosi flood management, manifesting developmentalist, technocratic, and disciplinary dimensions. Its selective care and governmentality foster conditions for community resistance, which engages the state strategically.

1. Context and Questions



Figure 1: Family displaced due to floods settled on the embankment
Source: Author

Figure 1 captures the immediate human impact of breach of embankment and resultant floods. The picture was taken in the first week of October 2024 in Darbhanga district of Bihar where the western security embankment on the river Kosi was first overtopped and then breached by the roaring river. The river flooded the areas allegedly protected by the embankments and the community lost its homes and agricultural fields and had to squat on the embankments in the immediate aftermath of the floods.

It is interesting to note that floods were caused due to (the breach of) a flood-control structure. The community in the countryside suffered because of the state's care manifested in flood management via construction of the embankments. The riverside is anyway subject to perennial waterlogging and land erosion due to confinement of the river, its water, and sediments.

It becomes interesting, then, to examine the role(s) played by the state and the related community's response in the framing and management of the floods as a disaster. This paper attempts to explore this objective through the following questions.

- How does the state frame care in flood management?
- What forms of governmentality are at play?
- How do communities resist and strategically engage with the state?

2. Research Methodology

Broadly, this study is ethnographic in nature with required engagement with archival documents, policy reports, and the secondary literature. Interviews with riverine communities, political leaders, disaster management and water resource department officials, and civil society organisations during a more than two year long stay in the field constitute the backbone of data collection.

The interactions were not limited to 'observations' but also transgressed to 'participation' in the subject of the study. The sites of field engagement were multiple locations situated strategically (in the countryside and riverside) around various structural interventions on the river, viz., embankments, security and guide bunds, bridges, etc. One of the most important challenges in conducting this research was to reflexively examine the positionality as a researcher without losing the required objectivity. Navigating the fluvial landscape, developing relationships with the community and accessing state officials were some of the other challenges.

3. Ecological Backdrop of Kosi Region

The Kosi River originates in the Himalayas at 7000 m above sea level and enters India near Bhimnagar, draining regions in Tibet, Nepal, and India. Its catchment area totals 93,355 km², with only 20% situated in India (Water Resource Department, 2002). The monsoon period from mid-June to mid-October accounts for 80% of the yearly rainfall. In the plains, as the river slows down, sediment deposition causes the river to widen its bed. The river transports a huge silt load of around 100 million m³ annually, stemming from weak layers of the young fold mountains like the Himalayas, altered land use patterns through massive deforestation, and seismic activities in the upper catchment—this led to a 160 km migration between 1723 and 1948 (Gole and Chitale, 1966). The river's discharge and sediment have influenced local lives since ancient times, as noted by colonial engineers and administrators (Buchanan, 1809-10). Major floods occurred in 1869 and 1870, which pushed the colonial state to seek control of the Kosi River.

Willcocks (1930) documents how the traditional irrigation system made productive use of flood waters and silt without generating drainage problems. Mishra (2001) discusses the approach of “controlled flooding” that enabled both flood control and irrigation benefits¹. People possessed a detailed understanding of flood levels and developed adaptation mechanisms. They tailored their houses, cropping patterns, transportation, and other aspects accordingly. Small-scale bunds were created to help manage floods partially (Mishra, 2008a). Essential life-saving skills included boat rowing, walking in the river, and swimming. There was also a cultural practice of offering animal sacrifice to appease the river. In stark contrast, the embankments have caused waterlogging across the countryside, increased waterborne diseases, and led to declining agriculture.

4. State's Interventions on the River

The Permanent Land Settlement of 1793 served as a crucial revenue source for the colonial state, though it was challenging to implement in the flood-prone Kosi region due to continuous erosion and submergence of land in the river and resultant non-permanence of the land. River control was considered but ultimately rejected after seeing the negative impacts of embankments² in other parts of the country. Mishra (1997) explains the construction of roads,

¹ Presently, the community understands that the floods bring fine silt with them, which is very fertile and rejuvenates the ground. Floods were also used to replenish water storage facilities at the village level, like tanks and ponds.

² Embankments are earthen walls constructed parallel to the flow of the river and effectively constrain the width available to the river to spread its water when the discharge is higher, generally in monsoon months for the Himalayan rivers. They also disrupt the link between the main channel of the river and its paleochannels, which

railway lines, and bridges following the 1857 revolt to control the hinterland and how they led to obstruction in the natural flow of the river and intensification of the impact of floods. Gilmartin (1994) supports the idea that colonial efforts to control water were tied to revenue collection and disciplining the population. By the end of the 19th century, based on experiences from other parts of the country, the general mood was against confining the river, as it could worsen floods and cause land erosion (O'Malley, 1911; Shillingford, 1895). Despite this, the 1953 floods resulted in the Kosi Project of 1954, featuring two parallel embankments, a barrage equipped with 56 gates, and a pair of canals. This decision was driven by a host of factors like imperatives of nation building, electoral calculations, landed interests, etc. (Jha, 2012). To institutionalise the cooperation between India and Nepal, an agreement was reached for the maintenance of these structures (Water Resource Department, 2002). However, the structural interventions on the river did not stop with the Kosi project, and in recent times, the Sikrahatta-Majhari Low Bund has been added on the western side inside the original Western embankment. The Kosi Mahasetu, which includes a highway and a railway line, has been completed, and the Bakaur-Bheja Bridge is currently under construction. Effectively, all these interventions end up further constraining the flow of the river.

5. Socio-Ecological Transformations due to Structural Interventions

During the fieldwork, people reported that the ramifications of the embankments started becoming clearer in the 1980s. The Kharif crop has declined with time. Now, instead of paddy, people rely more on wheat (I. Singh, personal communications, May 31, 2023). Floods are more devastating, and the riverbed has swollen due to the silt's confinement, making the land uncultivable (Mishra, 2008a). Singh et al. (2021) lament the loss of traditional patterns of utilising flood water and silt for agriculture. The embankments have disturbed the Kosi region's balance between people and the river. Out-migration has increased in the absence of non-agricultural livelihoods. Hence, we witness that the structural interventions on the river systematically rendered the natural propensity of the river to flood and spread over a larger area into a calamity, which has drastically disturbed the ecological backdrop of the region and how the community lived with the river and its floods. Despite the human-made disaster, the government collects lagan from the people without providing them with basic civic amenities like hospitals, schools, etc.

leads to waterlogging and drainage congestion. They also increase the intensity of flooding and land erosion. Hence, they have not been visualised as a long-term or sustainable approach to manage floods.

Kumar and Das (2019) argue that the geographical marginalisation of the areas within, like those inside the embankment, leads to social and economic underdevelopment. Make-shift schools inside the embankment are in a deplorable condition. People shift their homes due to the vagaries of the river. People trapped within the embankment have not been rehabilitated adequately. The relief work during the floods is not up to the mark, and people are left to fend for themselves.



Figure 2. Vast expanse of silt within the embankments.
Source: Author

Pandey (1963) argued that a river carrying so much silt and water is prone to flooding. Indeed, the Kosi embankments have been breached at least eight times significantly, causing enormous loss of life and property (Mishra, 2008a). Field respondents corroborate that they have lost their homes dozens of times. Their villages are fragmented, with various tolas lying at different places. Many varieties of paddy and fish are extinct due to changes in the river's character (FGD, January 15, 2022). The recent structural interventions have further constricted the river flow causing intense land erosion, prolonged floodwater logging, and a breach of the embankment. The lives of around 10 lakh people³ within the embankments are deplorable (Mishra, 2008b).

Sinha (2008) criticises the focus only on the hydrological character of the river and ignorance

³ Mishra estimates this population based on Census 2001. The actual number in 2025 may vary.

about its morphological properties while imagining the structural flood management approach using embankments. The river Kosi cannot be reduced to its water discharge merely, as sediment is a critical component of the river dynamics. Dixit (2009) also criticises the choice of the embankment as a flood management technology. Embankments create a “false sense of security” in the countryside. The changing land use pattern in the upper catchment, monsoon vagaries, and erroneous hydrological science assumptions make river behaviour prediction challenging. The embankments convert normal river behaviour into a man-made disaster. The proposal of building a high dam in the river’s upper reaches is also fraught with risks and limitations, as it lies in a tectonically active area. The sediment load may soon render the dam futile, and any dam failure may lead to a significant catastrophe. Shrestha et al. (2010) critically analyse the institutional structure designed to manage the embankments etc., and how it failed to respond in the wake of the 2008 Kusaha tragedy due to the fragmentation of responsibility between the Indians and their Nepalese counterparts and poor coordination.

We discussed above that the state, in its attempt to control the flood, intervenes in a socio-ecological context and systematically transforms it. This exercise of the state also has an impact on the community due to the realignment of interests, which are heterogeneous. In this context, the following sections delve deeper to examine how the Kosi floods, their management, and response from the community shed new light on how the state and the community can be reimagined. The findings from the field are preceded by a brief engagement with the literature on theories of state and resistance studies.

6. Relational State, Governmentality, and Everyday Resistance: Theoretical Underpinnings

Gupta (2012) challenges the way in which the state has been viewed traditionally as a monolithic entity having centralised power. Rather, he argues, that the state must be imagined from its everyday practices and not as an abstract pre-determined fossilised formulation. Jessop (2008) further connects the structures of the state and social structures such that the state does not remain an instrument but a web of social relations. Along similar lines, Foucault (2009) suggests that state is not a thing but a relational effect. Gramsci also sheds light on how the state remains in a prolonged war to maintain its hegemony through a mix of consent and coercion depending on the challenge to its hegemony (Hall, 1986). Viewed this way, it becomes possible to engage with the state with an aim to transform it. That is how the community creates space for resisting and strategically using the state. In this vein, governmentality becomes a critical concept to see how the state controls the space (including nature) and manages its

population through disciplining (Foucault, 2009). Scott (1998) further posits that the state needs to know the space and population by making them legible to developed technologies of rule. Alongside the attempt to know, the state's dominance of the space and population is also contingent upon strategic not-knowing. Boelens et al. (2019) deploy this idea of manufactured ignorance in the case of mega hydraulic structures constructed by the modern state to control territory and population. Li (2007) argues that the "will to improve"—the drive to uplift "backward" landscapes and livelihoods—is not altruistic but a strategic form of power that reveals the limits of governmentality. Dean (2010) argues that state care is a form of governmentality that governs through welfare and improvement.

Scott (1985) marked the dawn of Resistance Studies with *Weapons of the Weak*, introducing everyday forms of resistance among Malaysian peasants. He argued that overt, organised, violent resistance is rare, while unorganised, indirect, covert acts are commonplace, forming a spectrum between submission and defiance. However, one needs to integrate Scott's imagination of resistance with Foucault's understanding of power as being everywhere, productive, and operating in micro-interactions, creating disciplined subjects (Mills, 2003). Thus, resistance is immanent, not external, and coexists with power, shaped by its form (Foucault, 1978; Haugaard, 2012). Scott's focus on everyday resistance sparked empirical studies. Resistance is an assemblage of tactics—counter-repressive and productive—against sovereign, disciplinary, or biopower (Adams, 2017). In the Kosi floodplains, these tactics intertwine and are place-bound (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018). Post-Scott, dispersed resistance—neither collective nor hidden—emerged (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Productive resistance suggests alternative identities and policies (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Power and resistance are interlinked; studying resistance reveals power dynamics (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

7. Findings from the Field

7.1 Many faces of the State

The evolution of structural interventions on the river from pre-colonial times to the present reveals the state as a multifaceted actor in the region. Its most prominent face is that of a developmentalist state, which addresses riverine floods and associated socio-economic issues through mega-hydraulic infrastructure, ostensibly promoting disaster management and regional economic development.

While professing to uplift the population at large, its actions remain deeply rooted in the political-economic calculations of each era—colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary. British

state interests shaped early flood management debates, while landlord priorities drove decisions in the immediate post-independence period. Today, the flood management apparatus, led by the water resources department, and relief operations, managed by the disaster management department, are propelled by the nexus of politicians, engineers, and contractors.

In this process, the role of technical experts in sustaining the ideological hegemony of the statist approach to flood management—predominantly through structural solutions—cannot be overlooked. The epistemic dominance of the techno-scientific apparatus enables the state to frame riverine floods as a technical problem and propose corresponding solutions, marginalising community-based traditional knowledge. To undermine opposition to its project, the state adopts a disciplinary stance, stigmatising riverside residents as occupying the ‘wrong place’ (destined for inundation by the river), thereby eroding their legitimate claims to rehabilitation and relief.

7.2 Care and Control

Despite diverse political and economic motivations, the state articulates its interventions in the language of care, however selective. In the post-colonial era, political leaders harnessed the euphoria of nation-building by framing developmental projects as *yajna*, expecting citizens to contribute *shramdan* as their offering. In this way, the state depoliticised and spiritualised infrastructure projects, thereby securing moral high ground for itself. It must be explicitly noted that the Kosi Project was designed to control the river and protect the countryside from recurring floods. Yet, subsequent government reports acknowledged that people trapped within the embankments were sacrificed for the ‘larger good’ of society.

7.3 Community’s Resistance

To understand community engagement with the state, the community must be conceptualised as internally heterogeneous, with mutually contradictory demands. Embankments polarise neighbouring localities by protecting one while inundating another, thereby creating their own constituency. The specific location of neighbourhoods shapes their interests in relation to riverine structures.

Communities attribute their plight to flood-control policies through a semiotic shift from ‘Kosi Peedit’ to ‘Kosi Tatbandh Peedit’, politicising the cause of suffering and challenging the state’s portrayal of floods as an act of God (S. Rai, personal communication, March 25, 2022). As knowledge actors, they scrutinise embankment maintenance and relief operations by engaging with policy documents and official reports. They counter engineers’ explanations with

traditional ecological knowledge and expose corruption in public funds. People's movements consolidate these voices through bodies such as the People's Commission on Kosi River Basin. Resistance also manifests in local storytelling and folk songs. Recognising their victimisation grants moral legitimacy to squatting on public land amid erosion and submergence—a practice the state tacitly tolerates.

Notably, communities mobilised by people's movements sometimes demand structural interventions to protect their village or panchayat. When interests align with the state, such demands are more readily realised. Illegally appropriating excess land in rehabilitation settlements and diverting relief materials are also commonplace.

8. Conclusion

The Kosi River basin illustrates how disaster management becomes a site for contesting the state, revealing its multifaceted character through everyday practices of power, selective care, and governmentality. Far from a monolithic entity, the state manifests as developmentalist in its pursuit of mega-hydraulic infrastructure, technocratic in privileging engineering expertise over local ecologies, and disciplinary in stigmatising riverside communities as illegitimate occupants of flood-prone spaces. These interventions, rooted in colonial revenue imperatives and perpetuated by post-colonial nation-building narratives and contemporary politico-economic nexuses, frame floods as technical problems amenable to structural solutions. Yet, as evidenced by recurrent embankment breaches, silt-induced waterlogging, agricultural decline, and the marginalisation of over a million people trapped within the jacks, such "care" produces man-made disasters, converting the river's natural morphology into socio-ecological devastation.

Communities, heterogeneous and place-bound in their interests, respond not through outright rebellion but via strategic, immanent resistance that both challenges and engages the state. By reframing themselves from 'Kosi Peedit' to 'Kosi Tatbandh Peedit', invoking traditional knowledge against techno-scientific hegemony, exposing corruption, and leveraging folk narratives or squatting on public lands, they politicise state-induced vulnerabilities and assert moral claims. Simultaneously, demands for localised structural protections or opportunistic siphoning of relief reveal pragmatic alignments, underscoring resistance as productive and relational co-constituted with power rather than external to it.

This dialectic reimagines the state and community as mutually transformative: the state's governmentality breeds resistance, while community tactics expose its limits and compel

selective accommodations. Critical Disaster Studies thus gains empirical depth, highlighting how fluvial landscapes like the Kosi defy homogenised flood management paradigms. Future policy must integrate morphological realities, traditional adaptations, and transboundary coordination, prioritising equitable rehabilitation and non-structural alternatives to dismantle the false security of embankments. Only then can disaster governance evolve from control to genuine care, fostering resilience in harmony with the river's dynamic essence.

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